

Even 4,000 Steps a Day Can Have Big Health Benefits

But the more you walk, the better off you'll be.



By Dani Blum

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Exercise scientists long ago debunked the notion that you need to hit 10,000 steps each day to stay healthy and live longer. Even a little movement is good, they argue, though more is better. Now, a new study underscores that people can reap significant benefits from a comparatively small number of daily steps.

Researchers analyzed 17 studies that looked at how many steps people took, typically in a weeklong period, and followed up on their health outcomes after around seven years. They concluded that a habit of walking just under 4,000 steps per day reduced the risk of dying from any cause, including from cardiovascular disease.

That translates into a 30- to 45-minute walk, or roughly two miles, although it varies from person to person, said Dr. Seth Shay Martin, a cardiologist at Johns Hopkins Medicine and an author of the study. But the more steps you take, the better off you are: Mortality risk decreased by 15 percent with every additional 1,000 steps participants took.

"It's the best medicine we can recommend: Just going out for a walk," said Dr. Randal Thomas, a preventive cardiology specialist at the Mayo Clinic who was not involved with the study.

The study could not definitively prove whether the steps themselves decreased the risk of developing diseases and dying, or if people who tend to be healthier anyway also get more steps in throughout the day. And because the researchers combined data across studies to determine that 4,000-step target, it may not confer the same benefit for every person, said Jennifer Heisz, an associate professor at McMaster University and the author of "Move the Body, Heal the Mind," who was not involved in the study.

"I wouldn't want people to look at that as a magical number, that you must be above that exact step count," Dr. Martin said. "It's more so that more is better."

That principle is already well established in exercise research, said Dr. I-Min Lee, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and an expert on step counts and health, who was also not involved with the study. But the new research emphasizes that fitness is not "all or nothing," she said: Every little bit of exercise helps. The small snippets of movement built into our day — trailing from the bedroom to the bathroom, darting out to get coffee — add up and make a difference, she said.

But people who don't consider themselves to be active, or who may struggle to exercise because of chronic conditions, may underestimate the value of the movement they get, Dr. Heisz said. Taking an extra loop around the block, or stepping out for a 10-minute walk break, can have a big impact.

People who are at the high end of the step counts in these studies are likely already exercising, whether they're running or playing sports, Dr. Lee said; it is those who currently get few steps who could benefit most from moving more.

To incorporate that extra exercise, people can start by evaluating their baseline steps, either with a fitness tracker or a step counter built into a smartphone, and think about how to add just one walk into their day, Dr. Martin said. That can mean taking a meeting on the phone while walking instead of doing a video call, parking your car farther away or bringing your kids to the park and chasing them around, he suggested.

"People think, 'Oh, well, this isn't going to get me to those 10,000 steps, I'm not even close, so why bother?'" Dr. Heisz said. "It's a discouraging thing. But saying and keeping this mantra that some is better than none, I think you really can get mental health and physical benefits from just short, brief movement breaks."

Dani Blum is a reporter for Well. More about Dani Blum