

# Whether You Count Steps or Time Your Walk, What Matters Is Getting Outdoors

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July 26, 2024

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › An inactive and sedentary lifestyle can cause obesity and multiple health problems. Incorporating walking into your daily routine can break this cycle and reduce susceptibility to chronic health issues
- › Walking is a form of moderate exercise that cannot be overdone, unlike high intensity exercises and strength training
- › Two common methods of measuring moderate activity levels are exercise duration and walking distance
- › A recent study compared the health outcomes of time-based exercises or step-based activity. The health benefits of moderate exercise were impressive for both groups
- › An outdoor walk in a natural setting not only provides the benefits of moderate exercise but if taken at solar noon provides the added benefits of vitamin D production and near-infrared light exposure

The convenience of modern society and the demands of your daily routine can make it very easy to fall into a sedentary lifestyle. Cities and suburbs are designed for the automobile. Many career paths place you firmly behind a desk. We provide our employees with a standing desk and exercise opportunities but many employers do not provide these benefits.

Paying for a gym membership and working out can prove daunting for many. There is an alternative, however. Walking is free and is easy to include in your daily routine. The simple act of taking the stairs, consistently parking at the far side of the parking lot or taking advantage of walkable facilities can add thousands of steps to your daily total.

## **A Walking Revolution Promotes a More Active Lifestyle**

Recent initiatives have sparked hopes that we are at the cusp of a [walking revolution](#) where the safety and comfort of pedestrians takes priority over acres of asphalt parking lots, parking spots and six-lane intersections with unprotected sidewalks. Previously, urban planning focused on creating infrastructure that was only concerned with flow of motor vehicle traffic.<sup>1</sup>

Railroad right-of-way's abandoned in the mid-20th century have been converted into walking trails. Protecting walkers and bicyclists from reckless drivers with traffic calming measures like speed bumps is another recent area improvement.<sup>2</sup>

The use of green areas can be further encouraged by improving the aesthetics, accessibility and safety of parks.<sup>3</sup> A study in Norway found that the amount of green vegetation in a neighborhood was positively correlated with increased weekly physical activity.<sup>4</sup>

## **Is Activity Duration or Steps Taken a Better Measure?**

The popularity of wearable devices has prompted many to aggressively pursue step count goals. But are steps the best measure of activity or does exercise duration matter more?

A JAMA Internal Medicine<sup>5</sup> study of 14,399 women, with an average age of 71.8 years, examined the impacts of two different types of physical activity measurements: the amount of time spent in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) and the number of steps taken each day. The researchers aimed to determine how each type of activity influenced overall mortality and cardiovascular disease (CVD) outcomes.

The median weekly MVPA time was 62 minutes, while the median daily step count was 5,183 steps. Over a follow-up period of about nine years, the study found that both higher MVPA time and higher step counts were associated with reduced risks of death from any cause.

Specifically, for each standard deviation increase in MVPA time, there was an 18% reduction in the risk of all-cause mortality. Similarly, each standard deviation increase in step counts was linked to a 26% reduction in mortality risk.

Women in the top three quartiles of both MVPA time and step counts lived approximately 2.2 to 2.4 months longer over the nine-year period compared to those in the bottom quartile. This suggests that higher levels of physical activity, whether measured by time or steps, contribute to increased longevity.

The associations of these physical activity metrics with cardiovascular disease were also similar, indicating that both measures are effective in evaluating physical activity's impact on health.

So, according to this study, duration and step counts are equally valuable for lowering your risk of cardiovascular disease and death. As noted by the authors, incorporating step count-based goals along with time-based goals into physical activity guidelines could provide more personalized and flexible options, as the outcomes are similar.

## **Fitness Trackers Have Many Benefits but Beware of EMFs**

Tracking steps and fitness activities is a great way to stay engaged and motivated; in one survey, **79% of fitness tracker users noticed positive physical and mental health changes**. The benefits also include healthier eating habits and stress relief.

If you are in the market for a fitness tracker, I recommend against purchasing a Fitbit. Google has purchased Fitbit and is collecting your personal health and fitness data for their gain. The Oura ring is a superior device in several respects. Importantly, it does not violate your privacy by collecting personal data. It is also an excellent device for

monitoring sleep, using body temperature, blood oxygen levels, heart rate variability and heart rate to track your sleep stages.

It also allows you to turn off Bluetooth, which is an important feature. Fitness trackers rely on Bluetooth to wirelessly transmit data between the device and phone. I recommend avoiding any device with Bluetooth, unless you can turn it off.

The danger of Bluetooth is that it emits nonionizing electromagnetic fields (EMFs). Naturally, the manufacturers of Bluetooth products insist nonionizing radiation is totally harmless, but the International Electromagnetic Field Alliance takes a rather different view:<sup>6</sup>

*"Based upon peer-reviewed, published research, we have serious concerns regarding the ubiquitous and increasing exposure to EMF generated by electric and wireless devices.*

*These include – but are not limited to – radiofrequency radiation (RFR) emitting devices, such as cellular and cordless phones and their base stations, Wi-Fi, broadcast antennas, smart meters and baby monitors as well as electric devices and infrastructures used in the delivery of electricity that generate extremely low frequency electromagnetic field (ELF EMF)."*

The lack of awareness about the danger of Bluetooth is unfortunate since many benefit from fitness trackers. The Cleveland Clinic<sup>7</sup> found that half of Americans use at least one type of technology to track their health. The beneficial outcomes and top uses of health monitoring technology include:<sup>8</sup>

60% of Americans track their daily step count

53% monitor their heart rate/pulse

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40% track their burned calories

32% track their blood pressure

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53% began exercising more regularly

50% are getting in more steps per day than they used to

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34% are improving their eating habits

27% are more intentional about finding time to relax and relieve stress

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## Nailing the Sweet Spot for Exercise Volume

Living an active lifestyle can improve your health but overdoing some activities can have diminishing returns or negative consequences. **Nailing the sweet spot for exercise volume** is crucial. Taking 8,000 steps per day has been associated with a 51% reduction in all-cause mortality while 12,000 steps is tied to a 65% reduction when compared to adults taking only 4,000 steps per day.<sup>9</sup> Walking is a moderate exercise that is almost impossible to overdo.

This is not the case with more intensive forms of exercise. **Excessive weightlifting can even shorten your life.** A 2023 meta-analysis in the journal of the Missouri Medical Foundation<sup>10</sup> found that the benefits of strength training end at approximately 60 minutes per week. Intense strength training for more than 130 minutes can backfire, giving you a life expectancy that is the same as is you did not strength train at all.

The British Journal of Sports Medicine<sup>11</sup> came to a similar conclusion. They found that 30 to 60 minutes of strength training per week reduced all-cause mortality 10% to 20%, but training for over 140 minutes was associated with an increase in mortality. This also corresponds with the findings of the American Journal of Preventative Medicine,<sup>12</sup> which found a maximum risk reduction of 27% at approximately 60 minutes of resistance training per week.

That said, **strength training is clearly** important. An hour per week can reduce your risk of heart attack or stroke by 40% to 70%. Less than an hour can reduce your risk of metabolic syndrome and benefit cognitive health. But you can achieve greater benefits, with no risk of overdoing it, with moderate exercise. Moderate exercise can be loosely described as exercising to the point you are slightly winded but can still carry on a conversation.

Popular activities like mall walking or a treadmill fulfill the movement requirements but miss an important ingredient. An outdoor walk does more than just check the step count box. It can enhance your health through sun exposure<sup>13</sup> and the mood enhancing benefits of green spaces as well, giving you the greatest payback on your time investment.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Best Form of Exercise Is a Walk in the Park**

The environment in which you walk can enormously amplify the benefits of a healthy walk. Green exercise, walking in a natural environment, has been shown to have a more positive effect on your emotional health than walking in an urban environment<sup>15</sup> or exercising indoors.<sup>16</sup>

Comparisons between indoor and outdoor exercise has consistently found better psychological health outcomes for those who exercise out of doors.<sup>17</sup> Positive emotions, tranquility, restoration and motivation are major benefits of green exercise.<sup>18</sup>

The advantage of outdoor walking and green exercise over indoor walking and treadmill use can be traced to several factors. Intuitively, access to natural parks, playing fields, woodlands and safe trails fosters a more active lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> Enjoyment and satisfaction are increased with outdoor activity walks and exercise as well, increasing the odds of repeating the activity into a set routine.<sup>20</sup>

With inactivity being one of the leading risk factors for premature death worldwide, exposure to green spaces and sunlight can make a huge impact on global health outcomes.<sup>21</sup> The power of outdoor walks is not just due to better scenery, fresh air and a more engaging experience. Exposure to sunlight is one of the key benefits of a daily outdoor walk.

## **Solar Noon and the Nature Prescription**

There is no better time to walk than at solar noon (from 12:30 to 1:30pm for those on daylight savings time). This allows you to obtain additional health benefits from near

infrared solar radiation and vitamin D-producing UVB.

Getting sun exposure at solar noon is a great way to optimize your vitamin D levels. This is also the time of day when your risk of promoting cutaneous malignant melanoma (skin cancer) is the lowest. As noted in one study:<sup>22</sup>

*"To get an optimal vitamin D supplement from the sun at a minimal risk of getting cutaneous malignant melanoma (CMM), the best time of sun exposure is noon. Thus, common health recommendations given by authorities in many countries, that sun exposure should be avoided for three to five hours around noon and postponed to the afternoon, may be wrong and may even promote CMM.*

*The reasons for this are (1) The action spectrum for CMM is likely to be centered at longer wavelengths (UVA, ultraviolet A, 320-400 nm) than that of vitamin D generation (UVB, ultraviolet B, 280-320 nm).*

*(2) Scattering of solar radiation on clear days is caused by small scattering elements, Rayleigh dominated and increases with decreasing wavelengths. A larger fraction of UVA than of UVB comes directly and unscattered from the sun.*

*(3) The human body can be more realistically represented by a vertical cylinder than by a horizontal, planar surface, as done in almost all calculations in the literature. With the cylinder model, high UVA fluence rates last about twice as long after noon as high UVB fluence rates do.*

*In view of this, short, nonerythemogenic exposures around noon should be recommended rather than longer nonerythemogenic exposures in the afternoon. This would give a maximal yield of vitamin D at a minimal CMM risk."*

Combined with the massive benefits of walking at least 10,000 to 12,000 steps each day, spending time outdoors around solar noon is a powerful way to improve your health.<sup>23</sup>

## Sources and References

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