

The Benefits of Walking – How to Get More Steps in This Summer

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

June 28, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Walking is a low-impact and moderate-intensity exercise that you can do virtually anywhere for free. Regardless of your age or fitness level, you can reap the benefits of this simple activity for your mind and body
- › A Euronews Culture article explores the link between walking and creative thinking, highlighting a 2023 study published in The American Psychologist, which found that even short bouts of walking can help you perform better on creative tasks
- › Aside from improved cognitive performance, walking has been linked to a lower risk of mortality, diabetes, depression, high blood pressure, coronary disease, osteoporosis, sarcopenia, falls and more
- › Walking is even more beneficial when you do it outdoors. Tips are included to help you increase your step count this summer

What if the key to unlocking your creative potential lies not in a cluttered desk or a crowded room, but in the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other? If you're in need of inspiration, summer presents the perfect opportunity to embrace the outdoors and incorporate more walking into your daily routine.

Walking is a low-impact and moderate-intensity exercise that you can do virtually anywhere for free. It doesn't require any special skills, equipment or a gym membership

— just a comfortable pair of shoes, making it easy to integrate into most people's routines, regardless of age or fitness level.

An article¹ in Euronews Culture explores the link between walking and creative thinking. It notes that many of the greatest thinkers in history had one habit in common — they all enjoyed taking a good walk. I highly recommend you to adopt this simple habit as well to reap its benefits for your mind and body.

How Walking Fuels the Mind

Euronews Culture spoke to avid walkers whose personal anecdotes echoed a common theme — walking helped them focus and think more creatively.² However, the idea that walking improves cognitive performance is not merely anecdotal; it is grounded in science.

The article highlighted a 2023 study³ published in *The American Psychologist*, which looked at how the number of steps taken affects creative ideation performance in 157 young adults. The researchers assessed creativity by giving the participant verbal or figural prompts using a smartphone app.

The app automatically tracked the number of steps the participants took right before the task, and the researchers then scored the users' responses to determine their level of creativity. Their findings showed that both single bouts of walking and having a regular walking routine were linked to more original verbal ideas. Figural creativity also increased, but it's interestingly linked to feelings of happiness from being active.

Christian Rominger, one of the researchers who conducted the study, told Euronews Culture, "People who are walking more in general, were better in the creative ideation task, but they were also better in the task when they had more steps directly before the prompt." In other words, even short bursts of activity can help you perform better on creative tasks. "[D]oing 500 steps within five minutes will give us an increase in creativity," he adds.⁴

Another article published in The New Yorker elaborates on the science behind walking and creativity:⁵

"When we go for a walk, the heart pumps faster, circulating more blood and oxygen not just to the muscles but to all the organs – including the brain. Many experiments have shown that after or during exercise, even very mild exertion, people perform better on tests of memory and attention.

Walking on a regular basis also promotes new connections between brain cells, staves off the usual withering of brain tissue that comes with age, increases the volume of the hippocampus (a brain region crucial for memory), and elevates levels of molecules that both stimulate the growth of new neurons and transmit messages between them."

How Walking Further Benefits Your Overall Health

Walking has benefits beyond improved cognitive performance. In my previous [interview with Dr. James O'Keefe](#), a cardiologist with the Mid-America Heart Institute at St. Louis Hospital in Kansas City, he emphasized that for every 1,000 steps you take on average per day, your risk of mortality decreases by 10% to 15%. He also noted that walking may help improve your all-cause survival rate about two times better than vigorous exercise.⁶

Supporting this, a study⁷ published in JAMA Network Open revealed that even a modest amount of walking can significantly boost longevity. The authors found that adults who walked 8,000 steps or more within one or two days a week had a notably lower risk of all-cause and cardiovascular mortality.

Moreover, O'Keefe highlighted that moderate exercises like walking contribute to a dose-dependent decrease in diabetes, depression, high blood pressure, coronary disease, osteoporosis, sarcopenia, falls and more. A study⁸ published in the journal GeroScience echoes these findings:

"Walking decreases the risk or severity of various health outcomes such as cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases, Type 2 diabetes mellitus,

cognitive impairment and dementia, while also improving mental well-being, sleep and longevity ...

Walking's favorable effects on cardiovascular risk factors are attributed to its impact on circulatory, cardiopulmonary and immune function. Meeting current physical activity guidelines by walking briskly for 30 minutes per day for 5 days can reduce the risk of several age-associated diseases."

The GeroScience study⁹ also found that walking can help create new mitochondria and boost their function, helping lower your risk for conditions related to mitochondrial dysfunction. "While in-depth studies investigating the effects of walking on mitochondrial function are limited, initial studies have shown promising effects of walking interventions on mitochondrial function," the researchers explained.

These benefits led them to conclude that integrating walking into daily routines and promoting walking-based physical activities can be a highly effective strategy for fostering healthy aging and improving overall health outcomes in all populations.¹⁰

Walking Is Even More Beneficial When Done Outdoors

When it comes to walking, your environment can make a significant difference in the benefits you reap. Walking outdoors, in particular, offers unique advantages that walking indoors on a treadmill cannot match. Irish neuroscientist Shane O'Mara tells Euronews:¹¹

"The key way to think about this really is what benefits does walking confer on you, but also what benefits do you confer on society by walking? What we know is that cities and towns where people walk lots tend to be places where there [are] high levels of social trust and high levels of social interaction. And this is because you meet people all the time."

The importance of maintaining strong and healthy social connections to promote overall health is indeed well-established. Research¹² shows that it can help reduce your risk of premature death by up to 50%.

Additionally, spending time outdoors allows you to connect to nature, which is what humans are designed to do. Study shows that those who spend more time in nature are 59% more likely to report good health and 23% more likely to report well-being than those who don't.¹³

Unfortunately, a significant portion of the population is not spending enough time outdoors,¹⁴ which diminishes their sensory engagement and puts them at risk of attention difficulties as well as physical and emotional conditions.¹⁵ If you're considering walking, I urge you to do it outside to maximize its benefits.

A guideline commonly recommended for spending time outdoors is the 20-5-3 nature pyramid. This involves spending 20 minutes outdoors three times a week to boost memory, cognitive function and well-being; five hours a month in semi-wild nature, like a state park; and three days a year in remote, natural areas for a deeper connection with nature.

However, I don't recommend adhering to this guideline, as it's a weak attempt to define the bare minimum of outdoor exposure. Many people also fail to follow this recommendation despite its astonishingly low levels. Instead of following the 20-5-3 rule, I suggest you try aiming for the simpler goal of spending at least one hour a day outdoors, ideally at solar noon.

Walking Outdoors Lets You Reap the Benefits of Sunlight

One of the most significant benefits of walking outdoors is the opportunity to soak up natural sunlight. Exposure to sunlight is crucial for optimizing vitamin D production, which plays a key role in protecting against numerous chronic diseases, including heart disease,¹⁶ cancer,¹⁷ Type 2 diabetes¹⁸ and neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's,¹⁹ Parkinson's²⁰ and multiple sclerosis.²¹

In addition to the benefits associated with optimal vitamin D levels, walking outside in the bright midday sun helps improve your sleep quality by regulating your circadian rhythm and promoting melatonin production in your mitochondria.

The natural cycle of light from sun exposure and darkness at night is crucial for synchronizing your sleep-wake cycle, which is why I've always advised reducing exposure to light, especially blue light, in the evening, as even small amounts can interfere with your sleep.

With that said, I recommend you take a walk outside around solar noon, which is from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. for those on Daylight Savings Time because of the perversion of the time system. Timing your walk during this time allows you to get additional benefits of UVB and near-infrared solar radiation.

The Goldilocks Dose for Walking and Other Exercises

O'Keefe and three other coauthors published a meta-analysis²² in the March-April 2023 issue of Missouri Medicine, the journal of the Missouri State Medical Association, which revealed profound implications on the Goldilocks dose for different exercises. I view this study as a landmark that radically changed my views on exercise.

One of their findings is that when it comes to moderate exercise, which includes walking and is loosely defined as exercising to the point where you're slightly winded but can still carry on a conversation, more is better as it cannot be overdone. But how many steps a day should you aim for? In our interview, O'Keefe stated:

"Clearly, more is better. You get the big gains going from sedentary lifestyles – 2,000 to 3,000 steps a day – up to 7,000 or 8,000. [Here] you have this very steep reduction in mortality, improvement in survival. It continues to about 12,000 steps a day. Most of the studies show that it plateaus at 12,000."

This means the generally recommended 10,000 steps per day for optimal health is a good goal. As for strength training, the benefits max out right around 40 to 60 minutes a week. Beyond that, you will lose benefits. So, if you're planning to include strength training into your routine, O'Keefe advises to aim for 20 minutes twice a week on non-consecutive days or 40 minutes once a week.

To learn more about how much you should exercise, read my article "[Nailing the Sweet Spots for Exercise Volume](#)."

How to Get More Steps in This Summer

There is no doubt that walking is the easiest, simplest and most foundational exercise you can engage in to improve your overall health and well-being, so it would be wise to incorporate it into your daily routine. The Euronews Culture article lists the following tips from O'Mara to help you find the motivation to walk and increase your step count:²³

- **Track your steps** – To effectively increase your step count, it's important to establish a baseline of your daily walking habits. "People have no idea how much they walk, and having the walking app on gives you a consistent picture of what you're doing on average, from day to day," O'Mara says.

I recommend tracking your steps using a fitness tracker like the Oura ring. Most cell phones also have free activity trackers, so in a pinch, you could try carrying your phone with you. It's not ideal due to the electromagnetic fields (EMFs) emitted, but you could put it in airplane mode or, better yet, in a Faraday bag.

- **Sneak in extra steps throughout the day** – If you take public transportation, consider getting off a few stops earlier and walking the rest of the way. If you're driving, opt for parking spots farther from the entrance to get more steps in before arriving at your destination. These small changes can increase your movement without requiring much extra time or effort.
- **Set an alarm to get up and move** – Setting a reminder to take short walks throughout the day is especially helpful for people with desk jobs, who typically find themselves sitting for long periods while working on tasks or during back-to-back meetings.
- **Get a walking buddy** – "Get a partner in crime and have somebody that you can go for a walk with regularly," O'Mara says. Having someone to join you in your new walking routine can make it easier to stick to the habit.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 2, 4, 11, 23} Euronews, May 19, 2024
- ³ Am Psychol. 2023 Nov 16
- ⁵ The New Yorker September 3, 2014
- ^{6, 22} Mo Med. 2023 Mar-Apr; 120(2): 155–162
- ⁷ JAMA Netw Open. 2023 Mar; 6(3): e235174
- ^{8, 9, 10} GeroScience. 2023 Dec; 45(6): 3211–3239
- ¹² PLoS Med. 2010 Jul 27;7(7):e1000316
- ¹³ Mo Med. 2023 Mar-Apr; 120(2): 155–162, Nature Therapy
- ¹⁴ Medium, June 30, 2022
- ¹⁵ Yale Environment 360, January 9, 2020
- ¹⁶ International Journal of Nanomedicine January 19, 2018;13:455-466
- ¹⁷ Ageing Research Reviews June 2023, Volume 87, 101923, Introduction
- ¹⁸ Clinical Nutrition, June 2013; 32(3), P375-381
- ¹⁹ The Journals of Gerontology, November 2012;67(11):1205-11
- ²⁰ Nutrients. March 14, 2022;14(6):1220
- ²¹ PLOS Medicine, August 25, 2015; 13(3): e1001981