

Walking Pace, Not Just Time Spent Walking, Tied to Longevity Benefits

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Walking is one of the most accessible forms of exercise, requiring no special equipment, and supports your health whether you stroll around your neighborhood or simply walk to run errands
- › While many people track daily step counts or minutes of activity, new evidence suggests that the speed of your walking may play an even greater role in health outcomes
- › A large U.S. study revealed that brisk walking, even as little as 15 minutes daily, reduced overall mortality risk by nearly 20%. It delivered the strongest protection to cardiovascular health
- › Beyond longevity, walking supports nearly every system in your body, from improving blood sugar control to boosting mood, strengthening bones, and enhancing immune resilience
- › Other ways to maximize the benefits of walking include incorporating interval walking training, using a weighted vest or Nordic poles, having a walking buddy, and choosing outdoor routes for sunlight and stress relief

Walking is one of the most accessible ways to care for your health. You don't need special gear, a gym membership, or a carefully planned routine – simply do it on your way to the store, around your neighborhood, or during a short break in your day. With every step, you're engaging your body in a movement that has supported human health for generations.

Much of the conversation around walking has centered on how many minutes you log or whether you hit familiar targets like 10,000 steps a day. These measures are useful for keeping track, yet they overlook an equally important aspect of walking that influences how much you actually gain from it — the speed of your stride.

That simple but often ignored factor was the subject of a study recently published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. Nearly 80,000 adults from different backgrounds were followed for close to two decades, as researchers looked beyond step counts to ask a deeper question — could the pace of your walk reveal more about its impact on your health and longevity than time alone?

New Study Shows Pace Changes the Payoff of Walking

To explore whether speed matters as much as time on your feet, researchers asked participants to report how long they walked each day and whether it was at a slow or brisk pace. This simple distinction allowed them to capture everyday walking habits in a way that reflected real life, rather than a laboratory setting. Over years of follow-up, they compared walking patterns with health outcomes to see which approach offered greater protection.¹

- **The study followed long-term outcomes** — Researchers tracked deaths over nearly two decades and compared them with participants' reported walking patterns. This extended follow-up made it possible to see how daily pace translated into survival, while also accounting for other lifestyle factors such as diet, smoking, and different forms of exercise.
- **Brisk walking lowered the risk of early death** — Participants who reported including brisk, deliberate walking in their daily routine showed a clear survival advantage compared to those who walked only at slower paces.

What stood out most was that the benefit did not require an extreme level of effort. According to the authors, "Fast walking as little as 15 minutes a day was associated with a nearly 20% reduction in total mortality."²

- **Cardiovascular disease was most affected** – The protective effect of brisk walking was strongest against deaths caused by cardiovascular conditions, particularly ischemic heart disease and heart failure. These diseases remain the leading causes of death worldwide, and the study showed that even a modest daily practice of brisk walking provided meaningful protection against them.

- **Slow walking still offered benefits** – Participants who reported more than three hours of slow walking per day had only a small, statistically borderline reduction in overall mortality, and the results were not as consistent as those for brisk walking.

However, in a secondary analysis, longer durations of slow walking were associated with reduced risk of ischemic heart disease, echoing prior studies that suggest light-intensity walking still supports cardiometabolic health.

- **Brisk walking acted as an aerobic workout** – A faster pace was described in the study as a form of aerobic exercise that improves cardiac output, increases oxygen delivery to muscles, and makes the heart pump more efficiently. These changes strengthen cardiovascular health, help regulate weight and blood pressure, and reduce the risks tied to obesity and poor metabolic function.

- **The benefits held regardless of other exercise** – Brisk walking reduced mortality risk regardless of how much other leisure-time physical activity participants engaged in, including activities such as bowling, dancing, golfing, softball, jogging, aerobics, bicycling, tennis, swimming, weightlifting, or basketball. This means walking briskly adds another layer of protection for those who already lead active lives.

- **People with health conditions gained the most** – The improvements from brisk walking were particularly pronounced in participants who entered the study with chronic health issues such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or obesity. For these individuals, walking faster helped restore lost ground, improving circulation, metabolism, and cardiac function in ways that offered outsized benefits compared to healthier participants.

But how fast exactly is brisk walking? In the study, brisk walking was defined by the participants' own sense of moving at a faster, deliberate pace – enough that your heart works harder and your breathing deepens compared to casual strolling. Public health guidelines describe this as the level of effort where you're able to talk but not sing comfortably, which typically falls in the range of 2.5 to 3 miles per hour.^{3,4}

Other Ways Walking Benefits Your Overall Health

While the study highlights that brisk walking delivers the greatest protection, it's important to remember that walking in any form remains one of the most valuable habits to build into your life. Beyond its effect on longevity, walking is a low-impact activity that supports nearly every system. Here are some of the key ways walking strengthens and protects your health:

- **Improves blood sugar control and metabolic health** – Regular walking helps your muscles absorb glucose more efficiently, which lowers blood sugar levels and improves insulin sensitivity. This makes walking particularly important for preventing or managing Type 2 diabetes. Studies also show that daily walking lowers the risk of developing metabolic syndrome and helps regulate weight by increasing energy expenditure.^{5,6}
- **Strengthens bones and muscles** – Walking strengthens your bones and muscles by providing weight-bearing stimulation each time your feet strike the ground. That impact signals bone cells to build and maintain density, lowering your risk of osteoporosis.⁷

At the same time, the repeated contraction of your leg and core muscles keeps them active, improving protein turnover and preserving muscle fibers. This ongoing engagement helps prevent sarcopenia, the gradual loss of strength and muscle mass that accelerates with age.⁸

- **Enhances mitochondrial function and slows aging** – Walking stimulates the creation of new mitochondria and enhances the function of existing ones, improving how efficiently your cells produce energy. This boost in mitochondrial health increases resilience against age-related decline, with research showing that regular walking activates genes linked to slowing the aging process.⁹
- **Supports mental health and cognitive function** – Walking supports brain function by increasing blood and oxygen flow, encouraging the growth of new neurons, and enhancing connections between brain regions. It also nurtures your emotional health, reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety, sharpens memory, and improves overall mood.¹⁰
- **Boosts immune resilience** – Walking stimulates the production and circulation of key immune cells such as natural killer cells and lymphocytes, which strengthen your body’s ability to fight infections and reduce inflammation.¹¹
- **Promotes better sleep** – Walking, especially when done outdoors with natural light exposure, helps regulate your circadian rhythm and melatonin production, resulting in deeper, more restorative sleep.¹²

Whether taken as short daily outings or incorporated into routines with greater intensity, walking builds resilience step by step. For a deeper look at how walking benefits your well-being, read [“Don’t Underestimate the Power of a Good Walk.”](#)

7 Additional Strategies to Maximize the Benefits of Walking

Aside from picking up your pace, there are other ways to make walking an even more powerful practice. How you vary your routine, the environment you choose, and the way you use your walking time all add meaningful benefits. Here are strategies I recommend to make each step work harder for your health:

1. Incorporate interval walking – Research shows that alternating slower and faster paces, a method known as [interval walking training](#) (IWT), improves fitness more than keeping the same speed. The routine typically involves three minutes of relaxed walking followed by three minutes of brisk walking, repeated for about 30 minutes.

When practiced regularly, IWT lowers blood pressure, eases symptoms of depression, strengthens the hamstrings, improves aerobic endurance, and even reduces stroke risk.¹³

2. Use a weighted vest or backpack for added resistance – Walking with extra weight engages more muscles, increases oxygen use, and raises the intensity of the workout. Research shows that women aged 65 to 74 who wore weighted vests improved leg power by 10% to 11%, and younger adults also experienced greater training effects without changes to their natural stride.¹⁴

To do this safely, begin with a light load, make sure the weight is distributed evenly, and add more gradually as your body becomes stronger. Learn more about this approach in [“Pros and Cons of Wearing a Weighted Vest During Walks.”](#)

3. Try [Nordic walking](#) to involve your upper body – Nordic walking is done with fixed-length poles similar to ski poles, which you plant into the ground as you walk. This technique turns walking into a full-body activity by engaging your arms, shoulders, and core along with your legs.

Because it uses about 90% of your muscles, it raises oxygen use by 18% to 25% compared to regular walking at the same pace. The added involvement of the upper body improves posture, balance, and calorie burn, giving you more benefit from the same distance without making the effort feel dramatically harder.¹⁵

4. Walk outdoors for mental and physical renewal – Walking outdoors offers benefits that go well beyond what you get on a treadmill. Natural settings help ease tension, anxiety, and fatigue while lifting your mood, and the added sunlight supports vitamin D production and healthy circadian rhythms.¹⁶

You'll get the greatest effect if you spend at least part of your walk outside during midday, when sunlight exposure is strongest. Just remember to follow safe sun exposure guidelines, especially if your diet has been high in vegetable oils. I explained this further in "[Having Optimal Vitamin D Levels Helps Lower Your Risk of Melanoma.](#)"

- 5. Use walking time for creativity and reflection** – A 2023 study found that even short bouts of walking boosted creative performance on problem-solving tasks.¹⁷ Use your walks as a chance to brainstorm, reflect, or listen to educational audio, making the time productive for both your body and your mind.
- 6. Bring a social element to your walks** – Walking with a friend, family member, or pet makes the habit easier to maintain and more enjoyable. Social interaction during physical activity has been described as a "longevity goldmine" because it combines movement with connection, both of which are linked to longer life and better well-being. Regular companionship during walks also provides accountability, helping you stay consistent over time.¹⁸
- 7. Track your steps and progress** – Monitoring your daily walking helps you stay consistent and motivated. It also makes it easier to set personal goals and celebrate steady progress. One of the tools you can use to do this is the Mercola Health Coach app, which will be released soon.



Walking becomes far more than a routine when you treat it as a practice to refine. Each adjustment builds on the foundation of this simple movement and turns it into a lasting support for your health.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Walking

Q: How fast should I walk to improve my health?

A: You should walk at a pace where you are breathing harder than usual but still able to hold a conversation. This is typically 2.5 to 3 miles per hour for most adults. At this pace, your heart and lungs are working harder, which is what produces the cardiovascular and longevity benefits.

Q: How many minutes of brisk walking do I need daily?

A: You don't need long sessions to benefit. Just 15 to 30 minutes of brisk walking each day is linked to meaningful improvements in longevity and heart health. If you can do more, that's even better, but the key is to keep your pace purposeful.

Q: Do I still get benefits from brisk walking if I already exercise?

A: Yes, you do. The study found that brisk walking lowered mortality risk regardless of other physical activities like jogging, biking, or swimming. Adding brisk walking gives you an extra layer of protection, even if you are already active.

Q: Does walking fast help my heart?

A: Yes, brisk walking strengthens your cardiovascular system by improving circulation, lowering blood pressure, and making your heart pump more efficiently. This directly lowers your risk of heart disease and heart failure, the leading causes of death worldwide.

Q: What are other ways to make walking more effective?

A: You can maximize the benefits by mixing brisk intervals with slower recovery periods, using a weighted vest for added resistance, trying Nordic walking poles, spending time outdoors, walking with others, and using your walks as time for reflection or creativity.

Sources and References

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