Walk This Way - to Good Health

Walking is what our bodies are designed to do.

It’s a low-impact form of exercise that almost every able-bodied person can benefit from. Walking consistently and for long enough distances can help you maintain a healthy weight, which can reduce your risks for diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, and some cancers.

Even better, a dedicated walking regimen can also reduce stress, lift your mood, and give you opportunities to focus on mindfulness, enjoy music, or listen to audio books or podcasts. If you walk outside, you’ll get the added benefit of Vitamin D from sun exposure. Walking with family or friends gives you time to listen and talk while you enjoy the health benefits. Plus, research has shown that the more you walk, the faster your gait can become over time. A faster walking gait is tied to living longer.

To increase your physical activity in the simplest way, walking is the way to go. If you want to have a longer, better quality of life and feel better throughout your day, make walking a priority.

**How do I start to walk my way to better my health?**

If you’re a beginner, walking is a feasible and functional way to start a fitness program. Find a metric or stat that’s relevant to you, whether you keep track of your steps per day, miles per day or week, or minutes spent walking per day. There are many affordable fitness trackers and wearables like pedometers to help track your steps.

If you’re hesitant to incorporate walking into your daily life because it doesn’t challenge you like other forms of exercise, think of walking as a way to build your
endurance. That will enable you to fully enjoy more physically demanding activities like dancing, kickboxing, and yoga.

If you find it challenging due to your age, weight, or mobility issues, there are lower impact options. You can try walking intervals or walking in a pool. Intervals can be one minute of walking, one minute of rest for at least 10 minutes until endurance is developed. Walking in a pool takes advantage of your body’s buoyancy and reduces compression on the joints. That is good for someone overweight or with joint pain.

At our UHealth Fitness & Wellness Center, we have two Nu Steps (a reclining exercise machine that tracks steps and steps per minute). It’s great for patients in clinical exercise programs or physical therapy who may be overweight, mobility-impaired, or wheelchair-bound.

**Do I really need to take 10,000 steps each day?**

To make your step goal SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely), track a baseline day for your steps, set a goal from there, and give yourself a deadline. Become familiar with your “good step days.” Start with the goal of having more of these good days than low-step days. An attainable goal is to aim to increase your steps by 10 to 20 percent each week. Or, increase your steps by 2,000 steps each week (2,000 steps is about one mile).
Several research studies point to a range of **4,000 to 5,000 steps per day** as the minimum for gaining health benefits. You could make this your goal for less active or very busy days. If you **walk up to 7,500 steps per day** has been shown to reduce the risks associated with life-threatening diseases and increase longevity. If your goal is health maintenance, research shows that the intensity of walking isn’t as important as the total number of steps you take.

Consistency is the foundation of any successful fitness program. You'll get used to walking more steps per day, gradually. There may be days when rest is more important than your step count, especially when you’re sick. A lot of fitness trackers and apps can calculate averages per week and per month, which can help you stay motivated.

**How can I fit so many steps into my daily life?**

It’s important to consider how you will accomplish your walking goal. You can do so by increasing the number of steps per day in daily activities — like at work, while grocery shopping, or doing chores. Walk around the block after school. Or, enjoy family walks after dinner.

Another way to increase your daily steps is stair climbing. Take the stairs instead of the elevator in your building or at the doctor’s office. Park in a parking garage? Then, use the stairs to reach your desired floor. Take work breaks and find a nearby stairwell for a few minutes of stair climbing. After hours of sitting at a desk, this can also help wake up your mind.

If you’re rained in or snowed in, take laps around the house or building. Plug in that dusty treadmill.

There are many opportunities in a day to get on your feet!
Get creative in maintaining your physical activity. It’s much easier to be consistent (and better for you) than to try to get back into a routine.

Expert Contributor:

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