How important is it to walk 10,000 steps a day?

People who sit less and do any amount of physical activity gain some health benefits.

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There's no debate about the benefits of exercise for good health. One study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for example, found that 8% of all deaths could be attributed to inadequate physical activity.

The CDC recommends that people should get 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week, ideally spread out over multiple days. Moderate activity includes brisk walking, dancing or slow bicycling, while vigorous activity includes running, swimming laps and fast cycling.

The 10,000 steps target (approximately five miles) is essentially arbitrary—it reportedly originated with a Japanese pedometer company in the 1960s—and there's little evidence to suggest that it's important to reach this specific level every day.

But a recent study of middle-aged adults found that those who walked 7,000 to 10,000 steps a day lowered their risk of premature death by about 50% to 70% compared with those who walked less. Both men and women and Black and white participants benefited from this level of exercise. Walking more than 10,000 steps or walking faster did not further lower the risk. Another study found that older women who walked 4,400 steps a day reduced their risk of death, with the benefit leveling off at around 7,500 steps.

Another recent study found that engaging in recreational sports such as cycling, swimming, jogging or playing tennis for 2.5 to 4.5 hours a week was associated with decreased mortality.

In addition to aerobic activities, it's also important to engage in muscle-strengthening activities that work all major muscle groups. The CDC recommends such exercise at least two days a week.

If this amount of activity is difficult to achieve—for example, due to fatigue, health problems or time constraints—some physical activity is better than none. "Adults should move more and sit less throughout the day," the CDC says. "Adults who sit less and do any amount of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity gain some health benefits."

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