

Why Walk?

“If physical activity were a drug, we would refer to it as a miracle cure, due to the great many illnesses it can prevent and help treat.”

UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines 2019

There's overwhelming evidence that being active is good for us. Walking, in particular, may be one of the best forms of exercise for health as we get older. It's free, doesn't involve any special kit and can be done at any time from our own front doors. Walking is a low impact activity so the risk of injuries is small. It's a great way to get active for people who haven't exercised for a long time, as well as for older people and people who are overweight. And living in and around Cumnor, we are so fortunate to have attractive places to walk and a variety of footpaths through beautiful countryside, there to be enjoyed in all seasons.

So what are the health benefits?

Walking is good for us at all stages of life, from toddlers to nonagenarians.

Children and young people: boys are generally more active than girls. The evidence demonstrates that physical activity levels decline throughout childhood and into adolescence and follows on into adulthood. In this age group, higher levels of sedentary behaviour are associated with greater levels of obesity and lower physical fitness.

Regular exercise is associated with improved learning and attainment at school, better mental health, physical fitness and it contributes to a healthy weight.

In adults, there is strong evidence that regular exercise has the following health benefits and improves quality of life:

A 30% lower risk of early death

Lower risk of chronic illnesses

- up to a 35% lower risk of coronary heart disease and stroke
- up to a 40% lower risk of type 2 diabetes

Lower rates of obesity, helping to maintain a healthy weight

Lower risk of certain cancers

- up to a 50% lower risk of [colon cancer](#)
- up to a 20% lower risk of [breast cancer](#)

Musculoskeletal benefits:

- up to an 83% lower risk of [osteoarthritis](#)

- up to a 68% lower risk of [hip fracture](#)
- a 30% lower risk of [falls](#) (among older adults)
- a 25% lower risk of joint and back pain

Mental health benefits:

- up to a 30% lower risk of depression
- up to a 30% lower risk of dementia
- Helps manage stress and anxiety
- Improves sleep
- Improves productivity at work

Musculoskeletal benefits

We carry our own body weight when we walk. Walking helps to develop muscle strength and build strong bones, delaying the natural decline in muscle mass and bone density which occurs from around the age of fifty onwards. It also helps with balance and flexibility in older people, minimising the risk of falls.

Walking can lift our spirits and improve mental wellbeing

Even a short burst of 10 minutes, brisk walking has been shown to increase alertness, energy and positive mood and can be felt immediately. Research shows that aerobic exercise such as walking for 30 to 35 minutes, 3 to 5 days a week, for 10 to 12 weeks is more effective than other forms of exercise in improving mood. Walking in nature, particularly, has been found to reduce negative rumination and reduce depressive thoughts.

Exercise can also reduce stress, anxiety and increase self esteem. There is evidence that a 10 minute walk is just as good as a 45 minute workout in relieving anxiety symptoms. It helps to prevent mental health problems and has been shown to improve the quality of life of people experiencing mental health problems.

Regular exercise is recommended by doctors as a treatment for depression and can be therapeutic alone or in combination with psychological treatments or antidepressant medication.

Interestingly, walking may also promote creative thinking. The theory is that walking opens up free flow of ideas, allowing our minds to wander and encouraging the development of new ideas and connections.

Dementia and cognitive decline in older people

Physical activity has been identified as a protective factor in studies that examine risk factors for dementia and it helps delay progression of the disease in dementia sufferers. Studies have demonstrated a 20 to 30 per cent reduction in risk of depression and dementia for adults who take part in daily physical activity.

In regular walkers, there appears to be an increase in the size of the hippocampus, the brain area involved in memory and learning. Researchers have suggested that exercises like brisk walking might improve brain plasticity, the ability to grow new neurones and form new synaptic connections.

Broader benefits for us all

And at a population level, a more active society with people walking or cycling will contribute to a healthier environment for everyone with less congestion on our roads and cleaner air.

Dangers of a sedentary lifestyle

Previous generations were more active than ours, through work and manual labour. Technology has made our lives easier in many ways, we move around less and burn off less calories these days. Research suggests that many adults spend more than 7 hours a day sitting down, at work, on transport or in their leisure time. The Department of Health has described inactivity as “***the silent killer***”; sitting for long periods is associated with increased mortality rate and increased cancer risk. In other words, prolonged sitting is positively harmful, even in physically active people. Each of us needs to think about increasing the activities that suit our lifestyle and can easily be fitted into our day. Not only should we be raising our activity levels, but we should also be reducing the amount of time we all spend sitting down.

How much walking do we need to do to get the health benefits?

The good news is that there is no minimum amount of activity required: even small changes can make a big difference to our health over time; any amount of exercise is good and the more we can do the better.

The mantra is:

**“Some is good, more is better.
Make a start today: it’s never too late.
Every minute counts”.**

How fast do we need to walk?

A **brisk walk is about 3 miles an hour**, which is faster than a stroll.

Walking at moderate intensity causes an increase in breathing rate, making the heart and muscles work harder. The greater the intensity the more the benefit for the same amount of time. Moderate and vigorous activity can be differentiated by **the talk test**: being able to talk but not sing indicates moderate intensity activity, while having difficulty talking without pausing is a sign of vigorous activity. Walking is generally classed as moderate intensity, but may become vigorous when climbing hills or walking very fast.

Current recommendations from the Department of Health

1) Children and young people

The guidelines recommend that all children and young people do **at least moderately vigorous physical activity for an average of 60 minutes per day across the week**, and break up long periods of not moving with at least light physical activity. They should engage in a variety of types and intensities of physical activity to develop movement skills, muscular fitness and bone strength.

2) Adults

Adults whose main form of exercise is walking, should aim to do **at least 150 minutes of brisk walking (moderate intensity) each week**. Or to put it another way, we should walk for at least 30 minutes as briskly as possible on most days of the week. The aim is to be physically active every day, remembering that any activity is better than none and the more we can do the better. Try to avoid being sedentary for long periods. If it's too difficult to walk for 30 minutes at one time, do regular small bouts (10 minutes) three times a day and gradually build up to longer sessions.

In addition to walking, adults should do **activities to develop or maintain strength in the major muscle groups**. These could include heavy gardening, carrying heavy shopping, or resistance exercise. Muscle strengthening activities should be done at least two days a week, but any strengthening activity is better than none.

For those of us who prefer vigorous intensity activity (such as running) instead of walking, then the goal is at least 75 minutes a week, or even shorter durations of very vigorous intensity activity (such as sprinting or stair climbing); or a combination of moderate, vigorous and very vigorous intensity activity.

3) Frail older adults

Strenuous activities are unlikely to be feasible in people with chronic diseases such as arthritis, dementia or advanced old age itself. Any increase in the volume and frequency of light activities, and any reduction in sedentary behaviour, will contribute towards better health, support independent living and help to reduce impairment, loneliness and social isolation. A programme of activities could include sit to-stand exercise, short walks and stair climbing, rather than concentrating on exercise intensity.

What about the recommendation to do 10,000 steps a day?

Contrary to popular belief, this recommendation is not based on scientific research. It's become a default step count on fitness trackers and walking apps and while it's a worthwhile goal you can accrue significant health benefits with few steps per day. 7,500 steps a day equates to the Department of Health's recommendation of 150 minutes of moderately vigorous physical activity per week, the health and longevity benefits level off after this.

And on a personal note

Since the pandemic started, I've found that a daily walk with our Shetland sheepdog has helped improve my fitness and given me a mental boost. I feel I have more energy and am suddenly a little younger with a bounce in my step! I've enjoyed meeting fellow walkers and have discovered many footpaths and new landscapes in and around our local area. My current favourite, when it's not too muddy, is a circular walk from Cumnor Village Hall, down to Bablock Hythe, along the river to Farmoor Reservoir and back up the hill. I sometimes walk with a friend or family members and this has been a really positive way to keep in touch with people when we can't meet indoors. So do give it a try and I look forward to meeting you out there - if you have a moment do pause and say hello!

Further help

Go to the NHS website <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/walking-for-health/> for advice on walking for health, how to get started, exercise tips and fitness guides.

References

UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines 2019

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk>

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/walking-for-health/>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications> How to look after your mental health using exercise

