

Is 10,000 Steps a Day Really the Secret to Better Health?

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by Barbara Brody



Photo: [Pond5](#)

Your best friend is sporting the [newest FitBit](#), your boss just announced a [zombie-inspired walking challenge](#), and your mom is suddenly more interested in counting steps than Weight Watchers points. Meanwhile, all of them want to know if *you're* managing to rack up 10,000 steps a day. So are you? And if you're not, should you be?

First, a quick history lesson: While manufacturers of fitness trackers such as [FitBit](#) and [Garmin](#) might very well be responsible for the current 10,000-step fixation, the hype actually started in Japan back in the 1960s. While the Tokyo Olympics was happening, locals started thinking about their own fitness prowess. Soon after, the first commercial pedometer — called the [manpo-meter](#) — was introduced.

Manpo means 10,000 steps in Japanese, and the number was selected after [research](#) revealed that men who burn at least 2,000 calories per week by exercising have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease. That breaks down to about 300 calories per day, which most people can torch by taking 10,000 steps, explains David R. Bassett, Jr., professor of kinesiology, recreation, and sport studies at the University of Tennessee.

Since then, there's been plenty of other research proving that 10,000 steps a day — which equals about five miles — can help your health. "There are over 300 peer-reviewed articles with a focus on the 10,000

steps per day protocol,” says [Jinger S. Gottschall](#), associate professor of kinesiology at Penn State. One study, for example, found that people who take more than 10,000 steps a day have [lower blood pressure levels and better cardiovascular fitness](#). Another determined that getting close to 10,000 steps helps lower blood glucose levels and [cuts the risk of developing diabetes](#). Experts also say that this amount of activity can help you maintain your weight.

When 10,000 Steps a Day Is Too Much

Of course, there’s no such thing as a one-size-fits-all prescription for fitness, and for some people, 10,000 steps might be overkill. If you’re [new to exercise](#), you’ll want to aim for a slightly less ambitious target, says Gottschall. Try shooting for 3,000 steps per day, three to five days a week. Each week, tack on another 500 steps per day. You should end up hitting the 10,000-per-day mark in a few months.

People over 65 might also be OK with getting a little less, says Bassett. “I’m my opinion, 10,000 steps a day is a good goal for young- to- middle-aged adults,” but it might be too much for some seniors.

Should You Aim Higher?

Although 10,000 steps might sound like a lot, you’ll need to move *more* if your goal is weight loss. While this amount of activity can help keep your weight steady, [it isn’t usually enough to make the scale go down](#).

People who are already pretty active should also aim higher; that’s the only way you’ll see your fitness level continue to rise. (Here’s [why your fitness tracker isn’t making you thinner](#) — yet.) Try extending the duration of your workouts by 10 percent each week. Or up the intensity by jogging or running that same number of steps instead of walking, says Gottschall.

Mixing things up is also ideal, so it’s best to engage in a variety of activities — say, swimming or biking, in addition to walking or running. Be sure to add some strength training to your routine as well.

Got kids? Children ages 6 to 12 definitely need extra activity; the [President’s Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition](#) suggests that they get at least 12,000 steps.

How to Up Your Count, One Step at a Time

Simply strapping on a fitness tracker — whether it’s a [\\$9 drugstore pedometer](#) or a [fancier gadget](#) that measures your heart rate and the number of calories you burn — can get you motivated, at least initially. You’ve probably heard that little things, like taking the stairs instead of the elevator or parking further from a building’s entrance, can help, too. That’s true, but you’ll probably have to make a bigger effort if you’re serious about meeting your daily step goal, says Bassett. Here are a few tricks to try:

- Instead of “park and ride,” do the “park and walk,” says Bassett. Drive until you’re a mile or two from your office, then hoof it the rest of the way.
- Take your kids on a treasure hunt, complete with a map and prizes. Or get in on a real-life treasure hunt by joining the [geocaching craze](#). All you need is a GPS-enabled device (such as your smartphone).
- Host a [walking meeting](#) instead of joining your team at the conference table.
- Get a treadmill desk. Some models cost thousands of dollars, but if you’re crafty and you already own a treadmill (or can score a used one) you can [DIY one for next to nothing](#).

