

q exercise: THE MYTHS EXPOSED

Why 10,000 steps is a myth, and what to do instead

The public health messages around exercise have remained the same for years. “Find Thirty.” “Walk 10,000 steps.” We do our best and feel guilty when we don’t quite hit those targets. But have you ever wondered what the scientific basis of these are?

The thirty minutes slogan was based on the assumption this was the amount of aerobic exercise needed each day to help prevent weight gain due to our increasingly sedentary lifestyle, while walking 10,000 steps, was a marketing ploy.

Back in 1964 the Yamasa Company was busy putting the finishing touches to its first wearable pedometer in time for the Tokyo Olympics. They chose to call it “manpo-kei”, which translates into 10,000-steps meter. It’s a nice round number but there was no scientific evidence to back it up.

If your wearable step tracker is constantly reminding you that you haven’t reached your daily target, it’s time to stop chastising yourself and look at what to do instead.

Aim for quality rather than quantity

Going for a brisk short walk is better than a longer amble through the park. Though any opportunity to get up and moving is helpful to lower your risk of heart disease, improve your mood, clear your mind, reduce stress and boost your energy. Aim for consistency in the intensity of your walking, making it fast enough to get your heart rate up but still possible to have a conversation. The ideal cadence being 100 steps plus per minute. Consistency in your habit is what contributes to the ongoing health benefits.

Remain upstanding

In addition to walking every day, spending more time on your feet has a number of advantages. The use of variable height desks has become increasingly popular for the health benefits associated with reducing the time spent sitting on our bottoms. Research has shown their use improves working memory, attention and executive function (planning, organising and making decisions) but not weight loss.

Adjust your activity expectations during lockdown

If your normal exercise routine left the building with the arrival of Covid-19, look for ways to remain physically active across your day. The greatest benefit to increasing your step count is when you’re starting from close to ground zero. Here increasing your daily step count by 2000 steps brings the greatest boost to your general health. Otherwise over 6000 steps is cardio-protective and if you’re generally walking 7500 steps a day, you’re doing well. Naturally if you’re used to walking 10,000 steps each day that’s fantastic too.

What if the thought of exercise brings you out in a rash?

Not everyone thinks fondly of exercise, especially if it conjures up images of getting hot and sweaty in Lycra© While 44% of Australians are meeting the weekly requirements of 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week, 22% don’t do any. Allergies, exercise intolerance and excuses aside, the benefits are there for the taking, but perhaps in a different guise. Dancing, gardening, walking the dog, or chasing the children all count. Regularly getting into nature or living close to a green or blue space has been shown to increase the amount of time you spend moving outside, without even noticing.

Use exercise to boost your mood

Rather than undertaking exercise just for general fitness, it’s a daily essential for maintaining your mental wellbeing and lowering stress. If uncertainty, anxiety, worries or symptoms of depression are weighing you down, getting out for a walk, swim or cycle ride will shift your psychology and bring you to a happier place.

Here both aerobic and strength (weights) training have been shown to promote better mental health.

Mix it up to avoid boredom

If walking is your thing that’s great but adding in a couple of weights or resistance training each week is also recommended. Or you might like to explore eccentric training. This doesn’t involve having to wear fancy dress but relates to the type of muscular activity being used. Muscle strength is vital to balance and how well we function especially with age. An eccentric exercise is where you choose to sit slowly into a chair or take the lift to the sixth floor and choose to take the stairs down. This is ideal if mobility is limited or you want to avoid stressing the cardiovascular system while getting the same metabolic, mental and cognitive benefits associated with aerobic exercise.

It's time to ditch the myth of the 10,000 steps and seek to move more and sit less as the new exercise prescription.

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