

The benefits of walking: Preventing cancer one step at a time

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A study reports that taking 10,000 steps a day is associated with a marked reduction in the risk of developing or dying from cancer.

It is now clearly established that the adoption of a physically active lifestyle is associated with a significant reduction in all chronic diseases, whether cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, dementia or of several types of cancer. Unfortunately, this preventive potential remains largely untapped, with nearly three out of four Canadians not doing the minimum recommended physical activity of 150 minutes per week.

DAILY STEPS

Another simple way to estimate activity level is to measure the number of steps taken during a day (1).

Again, studies that have measured this parameter confirm that most North Americans are not very active, taking on average only between 4,000 and 6,000 steps per day, only half of what is necessary to be considered active (10,000 steps).

There is therefore a huge gap to be filled in order to achieve sufficient levels of activity to reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

Number of daily steps	Activity level
< 5000 steps	Sedentary
5000 to 7499 steps	Not very active
7500 to 9999 steps	Moderately active
10000 to 12499 steps	Active
>12500 steps	Very active

10,000 STEPS GOAL

A recent study clearly illustrates the importance of increasing the number of daily steps to prevent cancer and reduce the risk of premature death (2).

In this study of 78,500 people (mean age 61) followed for seven years, researchers examined the association between participants' daily step count (measured using a wrist-worn accelerometer) and the incidence of 13 types of cancer influenced by physical activity (which includes the most frequent cancers, in particular those of the breast and the colon).

They observed a very clear association between the number of steps taken each day and the risk of being affected or dying from one or other of these cancers, with a progressive reduction in the risk which reaches a maximum of approximately 35% at 10,000 steps per day.

Similar reductions in the risk of cardiovascular disease and premature death in general have also been observed, which again shows how harmful a sedentary lifestyle is and how essential being active is to improving your health.



For someone who is sedentary or not very active, a target of 10,000 steps per day may seem like a tough goal. But it should be remembered that an increase in the level of activity, even more modest, can have measurable positive effects: for example, a meta-analysis of 15 studies involving a total of 50,000 people showed that doing 6,000 to 8,000 steps per day is associated with an approximately 50% reduction in the risk of premature death (3).

The important thing is therefore to gradually start walking a little more, for example by adding 1,000 steps per day (i.e. a walk of only 10-15 min), and to gradually increase the duration of this walk.

Take the stairs instead of the elevator, walk instead of driving to the convenience store, go out at lunchtime, stay up while talking on the phone, plan walks in your diary, rediscover the beauty of nature in parks or the forest, so many ways to integrate this change into your life.

The survival of animal species, such as humans, has depended, throughout the evolution of life on Earth, on our ability to move, whether to escape ubiquitous predators, to hunt animals or to gather plants essential to our survival. We have been hunter-gatherers for over 90% of human evolution. Our physiology and biochemistry are intimately associated and coordinated with a very intense level of physical activity, and have been for millions of years of evolution.

This sudden sedentary lifestyle in recent decades is generating health problems because it is incompatible with the molecular mechanisms of homeostasis that keep us in this metabolic balance that we call "health". After quitting smoking, moving is certainly the change in your life that will have the greatest impact on the quality of your daily life, on reducing the risk of developing chronic diseases and on increasing your overall life expectancy.

- (1) Tudor-Locke C et al. Revisiting « How many steps are enough? » Med. Sci. Sports Exerc. 2008; 40: S537-43.
- (2) Del Pozo Cruz B et coll. Prospective associations of daily step counts and intensity with cancer and cardiovascular disease incidence and mortality and all-cause mortality. JAMA Intern. Med. 2022; 182: 1139-1148.
- (3) Paluch AE et al. Daily steps and all-cause mortality: a meta-analysis of 15 international cohorts. Lancet Public Health 2022; 7: e219-e228.