

**- Health**

# Simplest step to get fit? WALK FAST!

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SINCE the beginning of the pandemic, there has been one pastime that people have been able to indulge in more than normal. Walking.

A recent survey for Transport for London showed 57 per cent of people have been walking more than normal, and other surveys indicate it's one lockdown habit that people intend to keep up. But is walking alone enough to keep us fit?

The answer is it can be — depending on how fast you go.

'Nothing will give you quite the benefit that brisk walking does unless it's running — and it's as good as running,' says Thomas Yates, a professor in physical activity, sedentary behaviour and health at the University of Leicester.

In fact, Professor Yates recently published a study which demonstrated that the speed at which you walk is a good indicator of how fit you are.

'Fast walkers can live up to 20 years longer,' he says. 'It improves cardiovascular fitness, which is a measure of how efficient your heart is, and your ability to utilise oxygen, which is an indicator of fitness.'

That's true even if you feel only slightly breathless afterwards.

Professor Yates' study, involving more than 400,000 middleaged people on the UK Biobank database — which holds the health records of more than half a million UK residents — revealed that the pace we walk can even indicate our chance of fending off infections such as Covid-19.

The results, in the International Journal of Obesity, found that slow walkers (defined as going at under 3 mph) are 2.5 times more likely to develop severe Covid-19, and 3.75 times more likely to die from it than faster walkers — even among those of a healthy weight.

'If you're a fast walker with a high BMI (body mass index), your risk is still lower than for slow walkers with healthy lifestyle behaviours,' he told Good Health.

BUT just how fast is brisk walking? 'Three miles an hour or 100 steps a minute is the minimum: you get the greatest benefit increasing your pace from slow to steady (3 mph to 4 mph), but there is increased benefit over 4 mph,' says Professor Yates.

A simple pedometer can help determine your walking speed.

Fast walking builds numerous muscles, says Dr William Bird, a GP and creator of the Health Walks initiative, which encourages people to walk for mental and physical health.

'Fast walking will build your gastrocnemius (calf muscle), quadriceps (thigh muscles) and core muscles, which will increase your resting metabolic rate, and targets unhealthy visceral fat, which pumps out toxic chemicals around the stomach,' he says.

The reason for this is that fast walking, which is a form of low to moderate intensity exercise, burns fat, while vigorous activity utilises carbohydrates.

Walking can also build aerobic fitness — in other words, heart and lung strength. But to achieve this we need to exercise to at least 40 per cent of our capacity.

This is where another measure comes in useful.

The metabolic equivalent of a task (MET) tells you how much harder it will make your body work than when you are at rest.

The higher the MET of an activity, the more it helps you build aerobic fitness. (MET is the ratio between the amount of oxygen we consume at rest and the amount we consume when we are exercising.)

Activities have fixed MET values. Walking briskly has a MET value of four, while running at 6 mph has a value of almost ten — but our individual maximum MET capacity varies according to our fitness level and age.

For an average 20-year-old woman this maximum is 12.1 MET, compared with 8.2 for a woman aged 50.

‘If you have a maximum capacity MET of eight, walking — with its MET value of four — means you’ll be exercising at 50 per cent of your maximum, which will get you out of breath,’ says Dr Bird. ‘But if you have a MET capacity of 15, you will be able to walk for hours. The older you are, the more likely walking will increase your fitness.’

So a brisk walk counts as a good overall moderate intensity exercise for men and women aged 50, when our MET capacity is around 8.2 for women and 9.2 for men. But it may not be enough to push a fit 20-year-old.

‘If you’re younger, walk uphill, because the MET value goes up to eight or nine,’ says Dr Bird. ‘I would say 85 to 90 per cent of your exercise needs can be met by walking. What’s missing is vigorous activity and upper body strength.’

However, simply changing arm position will help. As Nina Barough, founder of the annual 26.2-mile MoonWalk event and author of *Walking For Fitness*, told *Good Health*: ‘If you keep your hands by your side, you’ll get to around 4 mph. To go faster, keep them bent at 90 degrees and pump them as you walk.’

This will help up your pace to 5 mph — which will get you covering each mile in 12 minutes.

And it’s unnecessary to fixate on achieving 10,000 steps a day. A 2019 study in the journal *JAMA* concluded older women who walked 4,400 steps a day had a lower mortality rate than those who took 2,700 — but benefits tailed off at 7,500 steps a day.