- Walking

Brisk walkers live longer, research shows

New research shows that fast walkers are more likely to live longer lives than slow walkers.

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The faster you walk, the longer you're likely to live, a new study shows.

Although much is still unknown about the aging process — what causes some people to die at 65 and some at 105 — a new study shows that habitually walking at a brisk pace while doing our daily tasks could add years to our lives.

Scientists at the Diabetes Research Center at the University of Leicester in the UK have found that the quicker a person's reported walking pace, regardless of their overall physical activity, the longer their telomeres.

What are telomeres?

Telomeres are "caps" on the ends of our chromosomes that play a key role in the process of aging. They protect our chromosomes during cell division, like the plastic on the ends of a shoelace protects it from unraveling.

Our cells are dividing all the time. The more they divide, the shorter the telomeres become. Once the telomeres are gone, the cell division process grinds to a halt and they die. Once these cells die, our tissues start to age.

That's why the length of our telomeres is important. The longer they are, the longer it takes for us to experience the detrimental side effects of aging.

The study

In the study published last week in Communications Biology,
researchers quizzed more than 405,000 UK Biobank participants on their walking habits to try and understand whether there was any association between walking pace and telomere length.

A little over half reported an average walking pace, around 40% reported a brisk pace and 6% reported a slow pace. The researchers found that the people who reported walking at an average or brisk pace had longer telomeres than those who reported walking at a slow pace.

They came to similar conclusions after testing the results on a smaller sample of around 86,000 people, whom they equipped with a device that tracked their walking speed. The brisker their pace, the longer their telomeres.

An important indicator of health

Thomas Yates, a University of Leicester physical activity researcher and a first author on the study, said the team chose to focus on walking pace and telomere length instead of jogging pace or diet, for example, because they've found in other studies that the rate at which a person walks is one of the strongest markers of their health.

In a previous study, the team found that with the exception of smoking, brisk walkers with an otherwise unhealthy lifestyle had a lower mortality risk than slow walkers with an otherwise healthy lifestyle.

"You can ask people what they eat, you can ask people how active they are, how much they sleep, all those other lifestyle factors and behaviors, and none of those come anywhere close to being as important as walking pace," Yates said.

He said this is because walking pace is a signal of a person's cardiorespiratory fitness, which is closely linked to a person's likelihood of developing high-mortality cardiovascular diseases that cause heart attacks or strokes, for example.

Cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of death worldwide, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), killing nearly 18 million people per year — around 32% of all global deaths.

Walk briskly for a long life Crucially, the researchers didn't find any evidence that the length of people's telomeres influenced their walking pace. Rather, they found that people's walking pace
influenced the length of their telomeres.

This is good news for those of us interested in living long lives. While much of the process of aging is genetic, the study shows that by adopting a brisk walking pace, people can increase the length of their lives by up to 16 years.

Yates said even five minutes of brisk walking per day can make a difference.

"In Western societies, people are very inactive generally, but everybody sort of has to move a bit," he said. "We have to walk from our car to the office, we have to walk around the supermarket... And so if you're doing that with a vigorous intensity then just making that change can be enough to reduce your biological age and give you a couple more years of life."

Intensity vs. quantity

The study's results show that intensity of activity likely plays a more important role in mortality than volume.

Along with measuring the briskness of the accelerometerequipped participants' pace, the scientists also measured how much they walked overall. They found that people who went about their daily activity with a high degree of intensity had longer telomeres, but there was little evidence for an association with overall physical activity.

In short: It's better to walk for an hour at a brisk pace than for an hour and a half at a slow place.