

Studies uphold walking's benefits

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By Jack Kelly, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



David Hallett/Getty Images

Two studies conclude there are many health benefits to walking.

More and more benefits are being found from an exercise that requires no expensive equipment or gym membership and no special training: Walking.

Two new studies, including one conducted by University of Pittsburgh researchers, show that lots of walking can benefit not only physical health, but mental health.

One reason why Americans are so much heavier than people elsewhere is because we walk a lot less -- sometimes even half as far as those in other countries -- suggests a study published in the current issue of the journal of the American College of Sports Medicine.

Adults in western Australia, for example, take an average of 9,695 steps per day -- or a little less than five miles, according to the study. Swiss adults take an average of 9,650 steps. Japanese adults take an average of 7,168. American adults average only 5,117 steps per day. There are roughly 2,000 steps in a mile.

That difference is a big reason the obesity rate in the United States is 34 percent,

but only 3 percent in Japan, 8 percent in Switzerland and 16 percent in Australia, said David Bassett Jr., lead author of the study.

"The health benefits of walking are underappreciated," said Dr. Bassett, of the University of Tennessee Obesity Research Center in Knoxville. "Even modest amounts of walking, if performed on a daily basis, can help to maintain a healthy body weight."

In the Pitt research, if you're older, walking also can keep your mind sharp, according to the study published in the Oct. 13 issue of *Neurology*, the journal of the American Academy of Neurology.

According to that study, walking at least six miles a week retards shrinkage of the brain and preserves memory, said Kirk Erickson, a professor of psychology at Pitt and the lead author of the study.

"Our study suggests that walking is good for the brain and reduces the risk for future memory decline," said Cyrus Raji, an MD/PhD candidate in Pitt's school of medicine and co-author of the study.

For the Pitt study, 299 people without dementia recorded the number of blocks they walked in one week. Nine years later, scientists took brain scans of the participants to measure brain sizes. After four more years, the participants were tested to determine if they had developed cognitive impairment or dementia.

The study found that people who walked at least 72 blocks a week -- roughly six to nine miles -- had greater gray matter volume than people who didn't walk as much. Walking more than 72 blocks per week did not appear to increase gray matter volume any further.

Of the 299 people in the study, 116 developed cognitive impairment or dementia. Those who walked less than 72 blocks a week were twice as likely to develop memory problems as those who walked that much or more, the Pitt study found.

Dr. Bassett's walking study, published in *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, the journal of the American College of Sports Medicine, compared 1,136 adults wearing pedometers with similar studies conducted by researchers in Australia, Japan and Switzerland.

"It did surprise me how sedentary U.S. adults are," Dr. Bassett said in a statement.

Fewer than 5,000 steps a day is considered sedentary, he said. You are "low active" if you take between 5,000 and 7,499 steps; "somewhat active" if you take between 7,500 and 9,999 steps, and "active" if you take more than 10,000 steps

per day, Dr. Bassett said.

The study found that American males average 5,340 steps per day, but females average only 4,912 steps per day.

Americans should add 30 to 40 minutes of walking to their physical activity regimen each day, Dr. Bassett said.

But much of the difference between the step totals of foreigners and Americans is that they incorporate more walking into their daily routines. They walk to places where we drive.

"In Switzerland and Japan, a much higher percentage of trips are taken by walking," Dr. Bassett said. "The additional walking seems to have an enormous public health benefit."

A few modest steps can increase the number of steps you take each day, experts say.

Get a pedometer. They're relatively cheap. You can get a good one for around \$20. Find out how many steps you take in a typical day. You may be shocked by the result.

At work, consider taking the stairs instead of the elevator. If you work on a high floor, get off the elevator a floor or two before yours, and walk the rest of the way. And on your way home, get off the elevator a floor or two before the lobby.

If you work at a desk or in a cubicle, get up at periodic intervals and walk around the office. You'll be sharper when you return to your desk.

Go out to lunch, provided you walk. If you brown bag it, take a brief walk after lunch.

When you go to the grocery store or the mall, park at the far end of the parking lot. It'll be easier to get a parking space, and the exercise will be good for you.

Weather permitting, take a post-prandial stroll after dinner. It'll aid in digestion and help you sleep better in addition to burning a few calories.

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