

# Walking now touted as “the closest thing we have to a wonder drug”

Getting exercise through walking is as easy as lacing up your sneakers and hitting the pavement or trail. Doing so is a safe way to get a workout without needing a gym, and it can boost your mental and physical health in several important ways. “Walking is the most studied form of exercise, and multiple studies have proven that it’s the best thing we can do to improve our overall health, and increase our longevity and functional years,” says Robert Sallis, MD, a family physician and sports medicine doctor with Kaiser Permanente. It’s never too late to reap the benefits of walking: A small 2013 study in the journal *Maturitas* found that seniors with an average age of 80 who walked just four times a week were much less likely to die over the study’s 10-year follow-up period than those who walked less. The many benefits of regularly walking include:

**1. Lower body mass index (BMI):** A study from the University of Warwick in Coventry, England, published in 2017 in the *International Journal of Obesity* confirms that those who walk more and sit less have lower BMIs, which is one indicator of obesity. In the study, those who took 15,000 or more steps per day tended to have BMIs in the normal, healthy range.

**2. Lower blood pressure and cholesterol:** The National Walkers’ Health study found that regular walking was linked to a 7 percent reduced risk of high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

**3. Lower fasting blood sugar (glucose):** Higher blood glucose levels are a risk factor for diabetes, and the National Walkers’ Health Study also found that walkers had a 12 percent lower risk of type 2 diabetes.

**4. Better memory and cognitive function:** A 2021 study published in the *Journal of Alzheimer’s Disease* found that when adults 55 or older with mild cognitive impairment were assigned to either stretching and toning exercises or to aerobic training—mostly walking—both groups showed some improvement on cognitive tests. But when compared with the stretching and toning group, the group that walked for fitness improved aerobic fitness more, had decreased stiffness in neck arteries, and showed increased blood flow to the brain in ways that researchers think could provide more cognitive benefits in the long term. A clinical trial of older adults in Japan published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* in 2015 found that after 12 weeks, men and women in a prescribed daily walking exercise group had significantly greater improvements in memory and executive function (the ability to pay focused attention, to switch among various tasks, and to hold multiple items in working memory) compared with those in a control group who were told just to carry on with their usual daily routine. And a study of 299 adults, published in the journal *Neurology* in 2010, found that walking was associated with a greater volume of gray matter in the brain, a measure of brain health.

**5. Lower stress and improved mood:** Like other types of aerobic exercise, walking—especially out in nature—stimulates the production of neurotransmitters in the brain (such as endorphins) that help improve your mental state.

**6. Longer life:** In a review of studies published in 2014 in the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, researchers found that walking for roughly 3 hours a week was associated with an 11 percent reduced risk of premature death compared with those who did little or no activity.



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