

Five surprising ways your walking speed reflects your health

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You know something is going on with your health when your body temperature rises above 99 degrees Fahrenheit, you feel pain, or your heart beats at a quickened pace without explanation. We take notice of these clear signs of atypical body functions. They're easily measured by anyone anywhere and they spur our doctors or us to take action. Our vital signs let us know when our bodies are not functioning properly and our health needs attention.

The five vital signs to measure the body's basic functions are:

- blood pressure,
- body temperature,
- breathing rate,
- heart rate, and
- pain.

But did you know there is another vital sign that is just as important, but widely ignored? It's your walking [speed](#).

Janet Bettger is an associate professor and [health](#) services researcher with the Duke University School of Nursing, Duke Clinical Research Institute, and Duke Global Health Institute. She asserts that mobility is not only associated with a person's ability to be physically active, but it also provides insight into what's happening inside the body today and can predict future health.

"Mobility is associated with every body system," said Bettger. "When [walking speed](#) becomes slower than what is normal for a person, it informs us that something could be going wrong with one of these systems or we should be asking about their mental and social well-being."

As a senior a fellow of the Duke Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development and a fellow of the American Heart Association, Bettger focuses her research on improving health and health care particularly for people at risk for [functional decline](#) or living with disabilities.

"I want to move the world to recognize walking speed as a vital sign because we could prevent a lot of pain and suffering," said Bettger. "Even in the United States with more than 35 million hospital discharges each year and millions more who receive care in the community, monitoring walking speed would provide direct targeted interventions and serve as a basis to promote improved health."

Hear more from Bettger about walking speed as a critical vital sign at Duke Forward in Denver—Ideas That Move the World Forward on November 16. Here she highlights five surprising facts about your walking speed:

- Walking speed is a critical indicator of your health.
- Your walking speed is a more accurate predictor of your life expectancy than just age or gender.
- Walking speed also predicts a complex battery of other health indicators including cognitive function, mental and physical well-being.
- More than any other vital sign, walking speed can predict future falls, hospitalization, and functional decline among older persons.
- A person needs to walk 1.14 meters per second to cross a two-

lane road safely. If we determine that there are community or regional differences in normal walking speed for a population, we could make changes to crosswalk signal timing and improve pedestrian safety.

More information: White Paper: "Walking Speed: the Sixth Vital Sign." [journals.lww.com/jgpt/Fulltext... Vital_Sign .2.aspx#](http://journals.lww.com/jgpt/Fulltext...Vital_Sign.2.aspx#)

Stephanie Studenski. Gait Speed and Survival in Older Adults, *JAMA* (2011). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2010.1923](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2010.1923)

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