

Don't have time to exercise? Here's a regime everyone can squeeze in

February 21 2019, by Emmanuel Stamatakis



Credit: Anete Lusina from Pexels

Have you recently carried heavy shopping bags up a few flights of stairs? Or run the last 100 metres to the station to catch your train? If you have, you may have unknowingly been doing a style of exercise called [high-](#)

[intensity incidental physical activity](#).

Our [paper](#), published today in the [British Journal of Sports Medicine](#), shows this type of regular, incidental activity that gets you huffing and puffing is likely to produce [health benefits](#), even if you do it in 30-second bursts, spread over the day.

In fact, incorporating more [high intensity activity](#) into our daily routines – whether that's by vacuuming the carpet with vigour or walking uphill to buy your lunch – could be the key to helping all of us get some high quality exercise each day. And that includes people who are overweight and unfit.

What is high intensity exercise?

Until recently, most [health authorities](#) prescribed activity lasting for at least ten continuous minutes, although there was no credible scientific evidence behind this.

This recommendation was recently refuted by the [2018 US Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Report](#). The new guidelines state any movement [matters for health](#), no matter how long it lasts.

This appreciation for short episodes of physical activity aligns with the core principles of [high intensity interval training](#) (HIIT). HIIT is a hugely popular regime involving repeated short sessions, from six seconds to four minutes, with rests from 30 seconds to four minutes in-between.

Among a range of different regimes, we consistently see that [any type of high intensity interval training](#), irrespective of the number of repetitions, [boosts fitness rapidly](#) and improves cardiovascular health and [fitness](#).

That's because when we regularly repeat even short bursts of strenuous exercise, we instruct our bodies to adapt (in other words, to get fitter) so we're able to respond better to the physical demands of life (or the next time we exercise strenuously).

The same principle is at play with incidental physical activities. Even brief sessions of 20 seconds of stair-climbing (60 steps) repeated three times a day on three days per week over six weeks can lead to [measurable improvements](#) in cardiorespiratory fitness. This type of fitness indicates how well the lungs, heart, and circulatory systems are working, and the higher it is the lower the risk for future heart disease is.

In fact, [research suggests](#) physical activity intensity may be more important for the [long-term health of middle-aged and older people](#) than total duration.

Achievable for everyone

The main reasons people don't do enough [exercise](#) tend to include the cost, lack of time, skills, and motivation.

Exercise regimes like [high intensity interval training](#) are safe and effective ways to boost fitness, but they're often impractical. People with chronic conditions and most middle aged and [older people](#), for example, will likely require supervision by a fitness professional.

Aside from the practicalities, some people may find back-to-back bouts of very high exertion overwhelming and unpleasant.

But there are plenty of free and accessible ways to incorporate incidental physical activity into our routines, including:

- replacing short car trips with fast walking, or cycling if it's safe

- walking up the stairs at a fast pace instead of using the lift
- leaving the car at the edge of the shopping centre car park and carrying the shopping for 100m
- doing three or four "walking sprints" during longer stretches of walking by [stepping up your pace](#) for 100-200 metres (until you feel your heart rate is increasing and you find yourself out of breath to the point that you find it hard to speak)
- vigorous walking at a pace of about [130-140 steps per minute](#)
- looking for opportunities to walk uphill
- taking your dog to an off-leash area and jogging for 30-90 seconds alongside the pup.

This type of incidental activity can make it easier to achieve the [recommended](#) 30 minutes of physical activity a day. It can also help boost fitness and make strenuous [activity](#) feel easier – even for those of us who are the least fit.

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