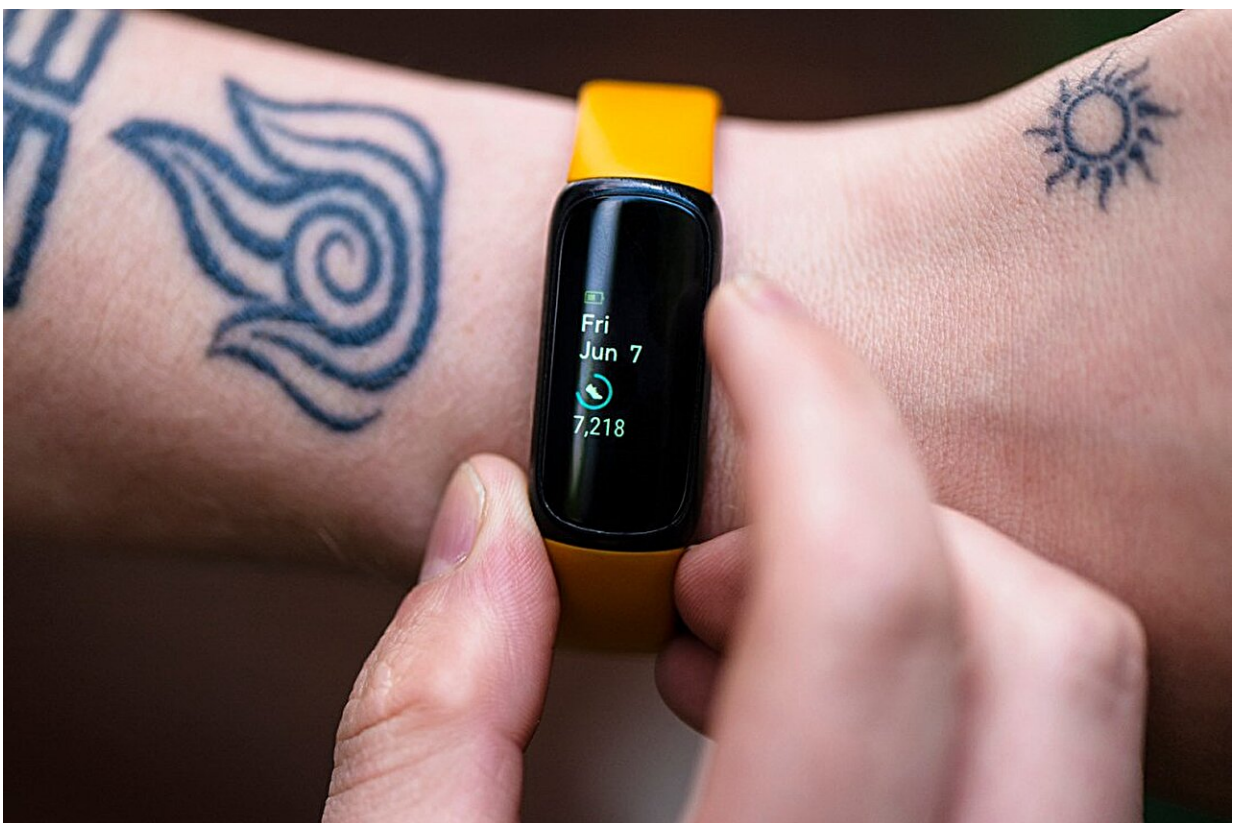


How many steps should you be taking a day? 'There's certainly nothing special about 10,000,' longevity expert says

June 10 2024, by Erin Kayata



Do you need to take 10,000 steps a day to stay healthy? Experts say there's no magic number to take to stay healthy. Credit: Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University

Feel that buzz? It's your fitness tracker reminding you to move so you can hit your goal of 10,000 steps a day.

But many users of these devices are already aware of the reality that this is an arbitrary benchmark that, according to Ram Hariharan, an associate teaching professor at Northeastern University's College of Engineering.

"There's certainly nothing special about 10,000," says Hariharan, who focuses on human longevity and machine learning. "Is there anything special about any of the values we look at in (health)? (Baseline numbers) are based on statistical averages rounded up or rounded down. This one is not based on statistical averages."

So how many steps should you be taking a day?

Hariharan says there's evidence that 7,000 to 8,000 steps today might have some health benefits for people, but there is no magic number of steps to take to walk your way to health. The key isn't the number, but focusing on both your health and fitness goals while also aiming to add more activity into your day.

Increase your activity level

Rather than trying to hit 10,000 steps a day, you should be simply trying to take more steps than you did the day before, says Stephen Intille, a professor with the Khoury College of Computer Sciences and Bouve College of Health Sciences at Northeastern.

"(10,000) is definitely an arbitrary number," adds Intille, who does research on the development of personal health informatics systems.

"The right way to do it is to increase whatever your average level is. If a person is very sedentary, they might be getting only 3,000 steps a day, and for them, that's going to be an improvement.

"For someone who's getting 10,000 steps a day, their goal, if possible, should be to try to increase that a little bit. ... The biggest thing though is you would just want to be trying to (get in more activity). Any increase is going to help you."

While your [fitness tracker](#) may be annoying when it scolds you for not taking enough steps, it can be a helpful reminder. The [average American only takes about 3,000 to 4,000 steps a day](#) which equates to about 1.5 to 2 miles.

If you lean more toward this end of the scale, Intille said walking is a good place to start your fitness journey and will help increase your step count day by day. Things like walking to places instead of taking your car can help with this.

Set health and fitness goals

Finding ways to fit [exercise](#) into your schedule, even if you have little time, is also more important than trying to work out longer and hitting an arbitrary number of steps, says Charles Hillman, a psychology and physical therapy professor at Northeastern University.

"The number one reason people cite for why they don't exercise is lack of time," says Hillman. "There are lots of ways to be physically active that fit into most people's schedules. If you only have a little bit of time, maybe go for a high-intensity, shorter workout."

While increasing the number is good, step count trackers don't take into account other activities that are essential to wellness.

Hillman says there's many different types of exercise that don't involve getting in your steps, like [strength training](#) and flexibility training exercises like yoga. This means wellness can go beyond volume (like the

number of steps you're getting) and can be focused more on the intensity of your movement.

"The most important thing is keep your body guessing," Hillman adds. "You're going to vary your workouts, your intensity, the mode, and the duration."

There's also the matter of your exercise goals: are you working out to build muscle, stay healthy, or to lose weight. Deciding what you hope to achieve with your exercise will help you better set step count benchmarks than trying to arbitrarily hit 10,000 steps.

Taking more steps in a day might also improve your health, but it also doesn't necessarily improve your fitness levels if that's your goal. Combining more steps with different types of exercise is a better way to tend to both your health and fitness levels.

"10,000 steps a day might [get you closer \(to your weight loss goals\)](#), but it's not going to get you there," Hillman says. "It's goal-driven. My goals might be to go out for that run or ride my [mountain bike](#) or [play a game of basketball in order to build my cardiorespiratory system](#) and use my muscles in a way to build up my muscle mass."

Move often, not all at once

It's also not enough to cram in all your steps into one hour-long run a day. There's also some research that shows that more important than getting in [steps](#) is getting them in throughout the day as sitting too long is bad for your health, even if you are getting in exercise at one point during the day.

"You can feel it if you're at a meeting and you're sitting for a long time," Intille says. "You stand up, even just for 30 seconds, and you sit back

down again, you often feel a little bit better.

The blood is flowing, your muscles are activated. It changes what's going on in your body a little bit."

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