

Slower walking speed may predict future mobility problems

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Being able to walk outside for several blocks at a leisurely pace plays an important role in living a vibrant, healthy life. Walking short distances allows you to get the physical activity you need, live independently, go shopping, access health care, and engage in a social life.

Being able to walk at even a slow speed is essential to all these benefits—but walking too slowly may foreshadow future problems that could prevent you from being fully mobile.

Until now, there has been no ideal way for [healthcare providers](#) to measure walking ability, since it involves more than just walking speed. It also is about how you deal with your environment (such as uneven pavement) and demands on your attention (such as traffic, other pedestrians, and street crossings).

In a new study, researchers assessed ways to measure complex walking tasks to learn more about early, subtle changes in walking. Their study was published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

In their study, the researchers examined whether performance on complex walking tasks involving both physical and mental challenges predicted a [higher risk](#) for an inability to walk one-quarter mile (roughly four blocks). The researchers suspected that these complex walking tasks would be more strongly tied to the risk for [mobility problems](#) than simple walking.

The researchers studied information from the Health Aging and Body Composition (Health ABC) study, which enrolled black and white adults in Pittsburgh and Memphis from 1997 to 1998. The participants were 70 to 79 years old when they entered the study, and they had no difficulty walking a quarter mile or climbing 10 steps without resting.

In the study, participants walked on several different paths and were given several different challenges to measure their walking speed and their ability to cope with mental and physical tasks at the same time. Researchers then followed up with participants every six months to see if they had any difficulty walking one-quarter mile due to a health or physical problem.

Participants reported any mobility problems or [disabilities](#) every year at in-person visits. By the end of the eight-year follow-up, more than half of the participants had developed mobility disability, meaning they were unable to walk one-quarter mile. Almost 40 percent had developed chronic mobility disability that lasted at least two years.

Participants who reported having mobility disability were more likely to be female, have diabetes, be obese, have knee pain, and experience breathing difficulty. They also had more symptoms of depression.

The researchers concluded that slow walking speed under both usual-pace and complex conditions was associated with greater risk for

developing mobility disability over the next eight years.

They also concluded that measuring your simple walking [speed](#) in the healthcare provider's office may be enough for your provider to learn whether you might be at risk for future mobility problems.

More information: Andrea L. Rosso et al, Associations of Usual Pace and Complex Task Gait Speeds With Incident Mobility Disability, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.16049](#)

Provided by American Geriatrics Society

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