Can Walking Less Than the Recommended Amount Lower Death Risk?

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At least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise a week is optimal for one's health, experts say. For one, such activity lowers the risk of developing or dying of health conditions such as breast and colon cancers. But even walking less than the recommended amount could increase a person's life span, according to new study findings published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, reports Medscape.

For the study, researchers reviewed data on more than 62,000 men (average age 71) and 77,000 women (average age 69) enrolled in the Cancer Prevention Study II Nutrition Cohort, a prospective study of cancer incidence and mortality for which participants completed multiple mail questionnaires starting in 1992. The primary endpoint of the study was death from any cause between 1999 and 2013.

At baseline, 5.8 percent of men and 6.6 percent of women reported that they did not engage in any moderate- or vigorous-intensity physical activity. While 96.2 percent of men and 95.4 percent of women reported that they did some walking, 46.9 percent of men and 49.3 percent of women said walking was their only form of physical activity.

After adjusting for several factors, including smoking, obesity and chronic illnesses, researchers found that walking at an average pace for 120 minutes or less every week was found to lower all-cause mortality compared with complete inactivity. Inactive participants were 26 percent more likely to die prematurely. (Walking was modestly associated with lower cancer mortality rates.)

"A lot of people find it daunting to start an exercise regimen," said Alpa Patel, PhD, the study's lead author and a researcher at the American Cancer Society. "They think they have to start jogging or doing something intense. There is a tremendous health benefit to simply going out for a walk."

In light of these findings, researchers are calling on physicians to encourage patients, especially as they age, to incorporate some walking—even if less than the recommended amount—into their lifestyle for improved health and increased longevity.

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