**Walk your way to better health**

Our global Vitality research shows that it all starts with one small step. One step in the direction of health for a longer lifespan, and just as importantly, ‘healthspan’ which is defined as the period of your life spent in good health – free from the chronic diseases and disabilities linked to ageing.

The good news when it comes to physical activity is that it’s never too late to start, especially with a simple, healthy habit like walking. The World Health Organization recommends that we all get active for at least 30 minutes, five days a week. But, if a 5km run seems too far off for now, start small.

According to Mari Leach, Biokineticist at Vitality, walking is one of the most underrated forms of exercise. “Just placing one foot in front of the other leads to some impressive mental and physical benefits,” she says. “I especially recommend it for those with knee, ankle and back problems and also for people who are overweight. Walking is a lower impact exercise and can also be done for longer periods of time”.

Additional benefits of walking are highlighted in a study published in the [*British Journal of Sports Medicine*](https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/49/11/710). Here, researchers found that those who followed a walking programme showed significant improvements in their blood pressure, heart health, weight management, cholesterol levels, mental health and overall quality of life.

All you need to transform your health is brisk walking, in other words, walk with a purpose. As a bonus, it’s free and you don’t need to spend money on expensive gear or equipment – other than a good pair of trainers.

Here are our top tips to get you started:

* **Find a safe place to explore:** Start by walking close to your home or place of work so that you get familiar with your route. If you have a pet, treat them to some fun outdoors activity, too. If you’re not comfortable walking alone, buddy up with a friend or colleague, or join a community walking group, which helps serve as a great commitment device, too.
* **Warm up before you set off:** Even if you start with a gentle stroll, warming up is a good exercise habit that helps to prevent possible muscle injury. Start slowly and add some light dynamic stretching where you stretch as you move. Gradually increase your pace after a set distance. A general rule when you’re starting out is that you should be able to talk (without becoming breathless) as you walk. Start off with a slow, comfortable pace and pick up your walking speed after a couple of minutes.
* **Listen to your body:** Especially when you’re starting out, don’t push too hard. Safe, consistent exercise is the priority so don’t push your limits in the early stages. As you get walking fit, you can add speed and extra distance to your routine. Aim to get your heart pumping and blood flowing – you’re not training for a marathon. *Yet.* Consistency is the key factor – rather walk at a pace that will let your body recover in time to walk again the next day.
* **Cool down … slowly:** The last phase of any physical activity session is to allow your body recover for a few minutes before you come to a complete stop. Let your heart rate gradually return to its resting rate. A few cool down stretches will also help to loosen your muscles and prevent stiffness the next day.

While walking is a safe exercise for most people, if you have any medical conditions or haven't exercised for a while, don’t rush it. Speak to your doctor or healthcare provider before starting any new exercise programme.

**Top Vitality tip**

Wearable tech is a great way to track how you are tracking against your goals by measuring the number of steps you take, the distance you cover and your heart rate during exercise. Having a ‘digital coach’ by your side during physical activity can encourage you to push that little bit harder when you’re ready to, measure your progress, congratulate you when you reach your goal and help keep you motivated to come back for more.

A Vitality-linked fitness device also helps you to earn Vitality points to achieve your weekly Vitality Active Rewards goals. The best news? When you achieve these goals you’ll get rewarded with a range of options including travel, lifestyle, shopping and entertainment rewards. Find out more about funding your own device through Vitality here and join our community of members who are already enjoying this benefit.

Small steps; strong shield. Start walking to a healthier you, today.