

May 28, 2024 ? Stair climbing has long been touted as a feasible, free way to increase physical activity

. After all, it's accessible for a wide range of abilities and ages, and you can reap the benefit without changing into gym clothes or even leaving your home ? if your house or apartment building has stairs. The activity even gave rise to a fitness fad in the 1980s, when the StairMaster skyrocketed to popularity. (Leave it to humans to invent a machine to simulate what's already in virtually every building.)

But this isn't rooted in common sense alone. Evidence is piling up that the simple act of climbing stairs ? and not even that many stairs ? can significantly improve your heart health and longevity.

The latest is an analysis

of nine studies that followed nearly half a million people and found that climbing stairs is linked to a 24% lower risk of early death from any cause, and a 39% lower likelihood of death from cardiovascular disease, which includes heart attacks, heart failure, and strokes. The findings

, which have not been published yet, were presented at the European Society of Cardiology's Preventive Cardiology 2024 conference in April. Other research has linked regular stair climbing with a lower risk of metabolic syndrome

(a term referring to several conditions that raise your chance of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes), improved fitness of the heart and blood vessels, and lower body weight

. Stair climbing ?targets both the cardiovascular and respiratory systems,? said Vasiliki Tsampasian

, MD, PhD, co-author of the new study and a clinical research fellow at the University of East Anglia in the U.K.

Of course, climbing stairs also burns calories ? up to four times as many as walking, said another co-author of the study,

Vassilios Vassiliou

, MD, PhD, a clinical professor of cardiac medicine at the University of East Anglia. A 170-pound man could burn well over 500 calories in an hour, while a 140-pound woman might torch 450-plus, according to the Compendium of Physical Activities, a tool developed by researchers to create a standard way to show how exercise and other movement affect the body.

The best part: You don't have to do this for an hour.

How Many Stairs Are We Talking About?

The researchers admit it was hard to quantify how much climbing is needed to see health benefits. Those nine studies varied in how many stairs people climbed, and how fast. ?But what could be seen is that the more stair climbing that was done, the better, independently of other physical activity,? said Vassiliou.

Up to a point, that is. One of the studies suggested that when subjects climbed six flights of stairs daily (about 60 steps), the benefits plateaued.

?So, for the purposes of exercise prescription,? said Vassiliou, ?reaching six flights daily would reduce overall and cardiac mortality.? (That number aligns with findings from a large observational study

published last year that linked five-plus flights of daily stair climbing with a lower risk of atherosclerosis, the buildup of fats, cholesterol, and other substances in and on the artery walls

.)

It might help to think of taking the stairs not as exercise but as a lifestyle tweak.

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Strength and Cardio Challenge

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Get the best of both worlds with this strength buliding, cardio burning workout challenge.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]

OBI OBADIKE

Hey folks. We have an amazing total body cardio fat loss work out today for you.

Before we start we are going to warm up and jog. OK? Get the blood flowing in the muscles. Make sure we got a nice little warm up.

All right. No injuries. Very, very important before you start the routine, slow little jog. You're going to have fun today. I promise you that. You're going to hate me, but you're going to love me. But you're going to have a great workout. Everybody's laughing here, but we're going to have some fun.

All right, fitness is fun. Blood flowing to the muscles. Five, four, three, two, one, switch feet. OK,

using the arms. Make sure you're breathing. You're switching to feet. I'm here with you. Great job. You're doing good. Doing 30 seconds. You're doing fantastic. Keep up the great work. Keep it up. Keep it up. You're doing really good. Focus. Make sure you're breathing. All right, five, four, three, two, one, break.

Now do this little slow jog. All right, we're resting right now. Use that rest. 15 to 20 seconds. Rest up. Use as much rest time as you can to recover to start the next one. We're going to go for jumping jacks. Let's go. Great job. Come on. You're doing good. You're doing good. Keep up the intensity, at your own pace. Great job. Make sure you're breathing. Make sure you're breathing. You're doing good. Great workout.

We are burning some calories. And so am I. And so are you, at home. All right, five, four, three, two, one, break. Woo. Nice little jog. Trying to recover right now, trying to rest. Use that rest time. You're working out to your comfort level.

All right, but you're still getting a great work out. The next exercise is going to be high knees. Oh, it's going to feel good. About to start right now. Let's do it. High knees. Use those arms. Pump up. All right, this is working your core. It's a total body work out. Great job. You're doing good. Keep those knees up. Focus. Make sure you're breathing. Very important to breathe. You're doing really good. I'm proud of you. Keep it up.

If I'm doing it, you can do it. I'm talking while I'm doing it too. And you can do it as well. Five, four, three, two, one, break. OK, we're jogging now. We are jogging. A slow little jog. You're recovering. If you need water, take your water. Very important to hydrate so you don't cramp up. You're doing good. I'm here with you. Keep it up. Keep it up.

Next exercise is going to be the Heisman. You probably watch football. Let's do it. Heisman. Great job. Come on. Come on. Use those arms. Use them. Come on. Come on. Come on. Come on. It's a little dance. Come on.

You're having fun. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. You can do it. You can do it. Come on. Come on. Focus. Focus. Come on. This is nothing. You can do it. Make sure you're breathing. I'm here with you. Stay focused. Five, four, three, two, one, time.

We're jogging. OK, we're jogging right now. Trying to recover. Slow little jog. If you can't jog, then just walk. It's OK. You're doing really good. Keep it up. Keep it up.

Next exercise. It's going to be fast sprint. Starting right now. Let's go. Get those feet, not too high, real quick, real quick. Use the arms. 90 degree angle. Arms, pump those arms. Pump those arms. Pump them. I'm here with you. Come on. Woo! Having fun. Come on now. Fitness is fun. You can do it. Come on! You're on your toes, balls. Come on. Keep it up. Five, four, three, two, one, break. Woo!

Slow little jog. We're recovering right now. Very important. Or you can walk around. If jogging's too much, then walk around. If you need water, take the water, please. Hydrate yourself. Very important. God, what a work out. I know you're getting a great workout, because so am I. I'm here with you. I'm not going to cheat you. And I don't want you to cheat me. OK, you're doing good. Keep it up. You can do it.

Next exercise. Basketball Jump Shots, you're coming up. Let's go. Jump. Come on. Not too high. Good pace. Three-pointer, two-pointer. Great job. Come on. Woo. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump. Great job. Come on, keep it up. You're doing good. Explode! Explode! Explode! Explode! Explode! Explode! Five, four, three, two, one, break. Woo!

OK, we're not done yet. We are not done yet. [LAUGHTER] Jog. All right, or you got to walk around. If you need water, take your water. You're doing good. We're almost there. OK, almost there. Jog around, or walk around. When you're always moving you're going to be burning calories. Switch feet. Let's go. Woo!

Switch those feet. Switch them. You're doing good. Use those arms. They're there for a reason. They're going to help you move. Woo. This is a workout. Please don't tell me you're not going to burn calories doing this. Five, four, three, two, one, break.

Slow little jog. And if you need to walk around, you can walk around too. You don't have to jog either. The main thing is you're moving around. Even if you're just doing one of these numbers, you're still burning calories. All right, doing some jumping jacks. Let's go. Great job. You're doing good. Keep it up. I'm proud of you. You can do it. I am here with you. I don't want you to stop. Keep

it up. You're doing really good. I'm proud of you. If I can do it, you can do it. Make sure you're breathing. Very important. I don't want you getting dizzy. Five, four, three, two, one, time.

You're jogging around now. Now we're resting. Oh god, fabulous workout. Walking around. You are doing good. If you need water, you got a dry mouth, take your water OK. Hydrate. I don't want you cramping up. Come on. Fast jog. Doing some High Knees. You're doing good. You're doing good. Get those knees up. Get your arms. You're running down the track.

You're feeling good. Your body's upright. You feel like an incredible sprinter. And you are. And you're going to get there. You're going to get that body. I trust you. Trust me that I can help you get there with these workouts, because I can. Five, four, three, two, one, time.

Jog it out. Or you can walk it out, whatever you prefer. I'm going to walk. OK, I'm going to walk. I need time to recover. Use that time. That's what it's for. You're resting and you're recovering. I hope you're doing good out there. Don't pass out on me. You can do it. Anybody can do this at any age. Do it at your own levels, OK. Heisman. Let's go. Come on. Good job.

Side to side, like a dance. Come on. Keep it up. Keep it moving. Come on. I'm here with you. Let's go. Intensity. Stay focused! Fitness is fun. Come on. You can do it. Fitness is fun. Focus! Focus! Focus! Focus! Five, four, three, two, one, time! Woo!

Oh my god. Crazy huh? Oh, you guys feeling good? Ah, I'm feeling good too. Oh my god, I think I might need some water. But I'm going to keep going, because I think I can pull out some more before I get that H2O. OK, let's go. You're doing good. Walk around.

This is your recovery time. Use your recovery time. OK, we're going to do for the Fast Sprint right now. Let's go. Fast Sprint. Quick. Come on. Come on. You're doing good. Get those arms moving. You're doing good. Come on. I'm here with you. I'm not going to leave you. I know you can do it. It's mind over matter, mind over matter. Stay focused. Make sure you're breathing. Up right. I know you're there. You can do it. You're going down that track. Five, four, three, two, one, time. Woo!

Oh my god. Great job everybody. Jog around. Jog around. Everybody doing good. We're almost there. We're halfway there. Halfway there, OK. You're doing really good. I'm proud of you. I'm proud of you too. Everybody's doing good. All right, jog it. It's [INAUDIBLE] recovery time.

Next exercise. Basketball Jump Shots. Let's do it. Come on. Like you're shooting a shot, you're shooting a shot. You focus. You're making a three. Come on. Keep it going. Come on. You don't have to go too high. Focus. Use your legs. You got legs. Come on. Use them. Use them. You can do it. Focus! Jump shot! Jump shot. Jump shot. Stay focused. You're right there. Five, four, three, two, one. Come on, break.

Rest up. Rest up. If you need water everybody, take your water. It's what it's there for. Keep it up. Keep it up. Great job. I'm sweating. All right, that's what it's for. And I'm sweating. And you're sweating too. Great job. Great job. We're resting right now. We're recovering. You've got a sweat, and you're sweating. that's what it's about. You know that you're sweaty, you know you got a great workout.

Next, switch feet. Let's go. Woo, I love these [INAUDIBLE]. And I know you do too. Don't tell me you don't love them. Don't tell me you don't love them! You love it! And so do you! [LAUGHTER] We're having a great work out today. Folks at home, this is what it's all about, getting lean. Get those arms moving. Five, four, three, two, one, time. Woo god, what a workout.

Jog it around. Walk it around. You're doing good. If you need to walk, walk. If you need a water, take your water. Use the rest time to recover. How do you recover? You're breathing. Don't slouch down to the ground.

Please don't. Not good. You're standing up. Or you can put your arms like this. We're doing jumping jacks. Let's go. Great job. At your own pace. So proud of you. Stay focused. I am here with you to help you get in great shape. These workouts can get you in great shape anywhere! At your home, at your park, anywhere. That's the beauty. Five, four, three, two, one, break. Rest up.

Walk it around.

How's everybody doing? -Great!

OBI OBADIKE

Everybody's OK. So you should be OK too, all right. If you need that rest, take the rest. If you need a water, take it. We are almost there. 75% away. 75% we've moved. 15% left roughly. All right, just jog it out.

Jog it out. Or walk it out. We're going with High Knees. Let's go. Woo! Let's go! Keep it moving. I'm here with you. Stay focused! Stay focused. You can do it. You can do it. Upright!

Arms. Arm movement. Come on. Come on now. Come on now. I'm here with you. You see my face? I'm here with you. You can do it. All right, fitness is fun. Eliminate the fear. Eliminate the fear. Five, four, three, two, one, time. Woo!

God, this is a great workout. I love this stuff! Do you love it too? -We love it!

OBI OBADIKE

They love it too. Jog it around.

Woo, god. That's what it's about. Getting a good workout. Getting lean. Small waists. Abs, all that good stuff. Getting to wear a bikini on the beach.

Heisman, let's go. Stay focused. Sidestep. You're doing good. Good stuff. At your own pace. All right.

If my pace is too fast, go at your own pace. You may not be super fast all the way through. And that's OK. You're still getting a good workout. Any pace. Don't matter. Good job. To the side. To the side. To the side. Come on. Focus. Five, four, three, two, one, time.

Woo, god. Jog it out. Jog it out. You guys are doing good. And you're doing good too. You at home, I know you're doing good.

Just watching me? Watch us. Jog it out or walk around. We're recovering. We're almost there. A couple minutes away and we're done. And you're done for the day. Isn't that great? Awesome.

Fast Sprint. Let's go. Focus. Focus. Look at my arms. Look at my legs. Look at my face. I'm relaxed. I'm breathing. I'm focused. I want to get a great workout. I'm going to the finish line, baby. Come on. Come on. And so are you. So are you.

You're not done yet. Come on. You're not done. You can do it. You can do it. Come on. Come on. [LAUGHTER] Come on! Focus! Come on. Woo. Five, four, three, two, one, time.

Oh my god, woo. Great workout. You guys are doing good. Oh man, good stuff. Jog it around. Jog it around. Or walk it around. It's OK. You can do this. You can do that. That's fine. Get your water as well. Oh god, that's the great stuff. Just rest up.

Breathe. Make sure you're breathing. Move around. You're doing good. I'm proud of you. We're almost there. We're right before the finish line. Basketball Jump Shots, let's go. Jump. Jump. Jump. Jump.

Three-pointer, three-pointer, three-pointer. Come on. Stay focused. You can do it. You can do it. Stay focused! You're doing good. Check me out. Do it at your own pace if I'm too fast for you. Don't have to jump that high. Great job. Five, four, three, two, one, time.

OK, that is our work out today. Incredible fat loss total cardio body work out. I hope you had fun, and I hope you enjoyed this workout. Take care.

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Strength and Cardio Challenge

Get the best of both worlds with this strength-building, cardio-burning workout challenge.

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If you're used to taking the elevator, Vassiliou said, start taking one to two flights of stairs every day. Build from there. "Any stair climbing is better than no stair climbing," he said. At six flights, "it would seem that they will get all the benefit from stair climbing," at least as far as disease prevention goes.

You don't have to take all the flights at once. You don't have to climb them at a certain pace. You don't have to don a sweatsuit and make a boot camp out of it. Just climb.

It's a convenient and practical way to help you reach the overall level of physical activity you should be getting. According to

the

CDC

, adults

need 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week — anything that raises your heart rate and makes you sweat. Depending on your fitness level, climbing a flight or two — or six — of

stairs may count as moderate aerobics.

There's a quiet bonus to this: Your body will start burning more calories when you're not

exercising. Exercise scientists call this NEAT, for non-exercise activity thermogenesis. It refers to the calories you burn just living your life, outside of sleeping, eating, and sports-like exercise. NEAT can have a powerful effect on your health.

NEAT accounts for most of the calories you burn via activity, even if you're a hard-training athlete, according to a National Institutes of Health review

. For people who don't get around much, it's responsible for up to 10% of total energy expenditure and as much as 50% in more active folks.

So NEAT can keep your weight under control, which reduces the risk of nearly every disease and life-threatening medical condition. Alas, 36% of Americans don't get around much, and 48% get only low levels of activity. A mere 16% meet the recommended guidelines for activity, according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

Why Only 2% of Us Take the Stairs

Michael Easter said humankind's "trudge toward inactivity" began with the Industrial Revolution, as machinery reduced our physical labor. He's a

fitness journalist

and author of

The Comfort Crisis

, a book that argues for embracing discomfort to grow mentally and improve physically.

"Hunter-gatherer tribes are the best model for how humans lived in the past, and they get 14 times more physical activity than we do in a day," Easter said. But most of us "live in a world where we don't have to do anywhere near that much work, and that's why we see health problems associated with inactivity."

So start with stairs, he suggested. Easter cites a study from the

American Journal of Public Health

that followed people in two shopping malls that both had staircases with escalators nearby. In one mall, researchers put up a poster reading "Stay healthy, use the stairs," and in the other, they posted multiple banners with similar messages.

Only 2% of shoppers in mall A chose the stairs over the escalator before the poster was placed there, and that number climbed to only 4.8% with the poster intervention. (It declined again before the study was over.) In mall B, with the banners, stair use rose to 6.7%, not a huge improvement.

"People will look at stairs next to an escalator and know the stairs are better for them," said Easter, "but they rationalize it by thinking 'How much better? It's just one staircase.' So they don't take it."

But little things add up. "If you take the stairs, and carry your groceries in a basket rather than push them in a cart, and then carry your grocery bags further to your car because you parked further away than normal - you start adding all that up and it makes a significant difference in health," he said.

Exercise was invented to offset our increasingly sedentary lifestyle. But exercise wouldn't be so essential if we got more activity naturally. "People don't understand how powerful incidental physical activity is. How powerful NEAT is," said Easter.

Stair-Taking Advice from the Stair-Taking Champion (Literally)

The easiest way is to just take the darn stairs every chance you get. But if you want to turn stair climbing into a workout, listen to

Wai Ching Soh

of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He's a 29-year-old professional tower-running athlete who's won the Empire State Building Run-Up the last 3 years in a row, climbing the building's 1,576 stairs in 10 minutes and 36 seconds in 2023.

Myths and Facts: Cardio over 50

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Is aerobic exercise after 50 too hard on your ticker? Get to the heart of the matter on cardio's many benefits regardless of age.

Reviewed by Brunilda Nazario, MD 01/06/2021

American Heart Association: "American Heart Association Recommendations for Physical Activity in Adults and Kids."

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Myths and Facts: Cardio over 50

Is aerobic exercise after 50 too hard on your ticker? Get to the heart of the matter on cardio's many benefits regardless of age.

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He said the technique for stair climbing is pretty straightforward?whether you're doing it as part of your NEAT in a day, or as a workout for your heart and blood vessels.

Plant your foot perpendicularly on the stair. For speed, place it on the innermost part of the step to turn corners faster.

Use handrails if needed for stability, Vassiliou said. According to Soh, tower runners use them ?to pull ourselves upward and reduce the loss of momentum during turns.? (Vassiliou said the science isn't clear if using handrails lessens the exercise effect.)

Lean forward with each step, Soh said, which moves your center of gravity in the direction you're going and makes the climb easier.

Don't worry about footwear. There's little impact and no need for extra cushioning. Tower runners generally wear thin-soled shoes, or minimalist footwear ? what Soh calls a sock shoe

If you want to get serious: ?A good beginner workout would be to walk up the stairs nonstop for about 20 floors using the handrail,? said Soh. ?When you get used to that, you can start taking two steps at a time.? From there, add speed and volume.

Here's what stair-climbing has done for Soh's health: A good VO2 max (a measure of aerobic fitness) for a male Soh's age is 45.4 mL/kg/min, and his is 76. His resting heart rate is 40 beats per minute, which puts him in the same class as a marathon runner.

Don't tell yourself you're choosing the escalator or elevator to save time.

?Unless you're going up to very high floors, like in a New York City building, I find that you won't get there any faster taking an elevator or escalator than you will using the stairs,? said Easter.

And you?ll add years to your life.