

WALKABOUTERY

Long walks are better for heart health than many short ones through the day, says a new study.

Simar Bajaj reports

A new study suggests that going on long walks may have more health benefits than taking the same number of steps a day over multiple short walks.

Hundreds of studies have shown that higher step counts are tied to lower risk of dementia, type 2 diabetes and other health issues. But how best to get those steps is less clear. The new analysis, published last week in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, is one of the first to study whether spacing steps out or consolidating them was linked to better health outcomes.

The analysis looked at people who took fewer than 8,000 steps per day; most participants took fewer than 5,000. Those who regularly walked longer than 15 minutes were 80 per cent less likely to die from any cause and nearly 70 per cent less likely to develop cardiovascular disease over a roughly 10-year period, compared with those who got most of their steps in walks of five minutes or less. (The average age of the participants was 62, so the risk of dying was fairly low to begin with: about 4 per cent in the shorter-walks group and less than 1 per cent in the longer-walks group.)

This data shows only a correlation; it does not prove that taking longer walks is healthier than spacing your steps out over the day. But some evidence suggests that your body needs more time and continuity to fully tap into exercise's health benefits, such as improved heart rate regulation, said Dr Robert Gerszten, the chief of cardiovascular medicine at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, US, who was not involved with the study.

"We're not saying shorter bouts don't work," said Dr Borja del Pozo Cruz, an epidemiologist at the European University of Madrid in Spain who led the study. "But it seems like it's much better to accumulate steps in longer periods," he added.

The researchers followed 34,000 people in the UK over about a week, using accelerometers to measure steps and sorting participants into several groups based on their walking patterns. The researchers analysed the data so that the total step counts

were similar across all groups. Steps were counted on any type of walk; those who went on 15-minute walks might have been strolling around the park while those with shorter bursts might have been doing light housework.

After accounting for overall health and lifestyle factors, the researchers found that people who got most of their steps in shorter walks had a greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease and dying from any cause over the next 10 years compared with those who took more continuous walks. The drop was especially sharp in sedentary people, or those who took fewer than 5,000 steps a day, Dr del Pozo Cruz said.

The study is not the last word on the best way to walk. The researchers factored in how people rated their health, but it's possible that people taking more continuous walks were healthier to begin with, said Dr Rishi Wadhwa, an associate pro-

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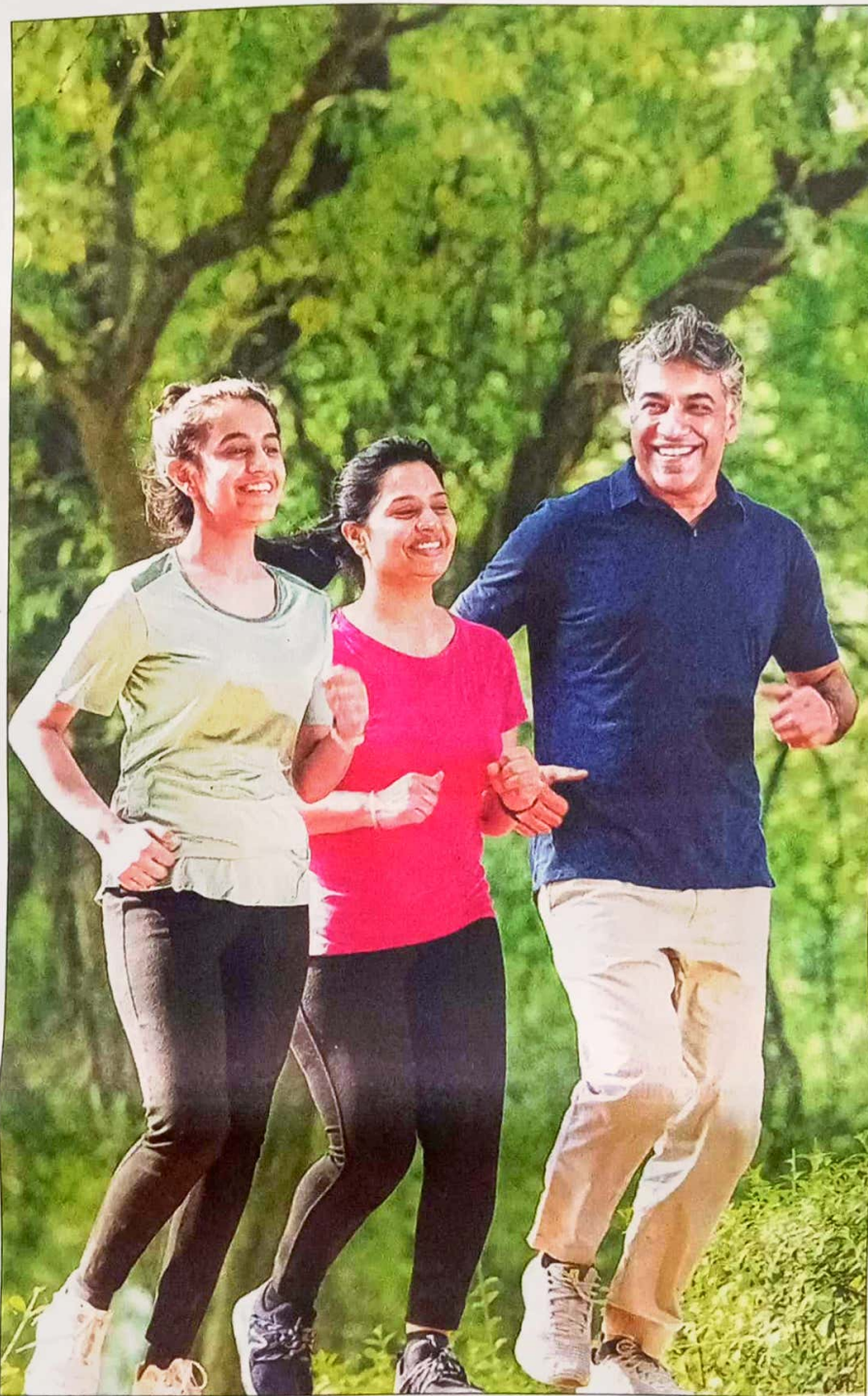
fessor of health policy and management at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, US, who was not involved with this study.

The study also didn't account for how walkable neighbourhoods were or any strength training of the participants. And step patterns were based on a one-week snapshot, which might not reflect someone's daily habits, Dr Wadhwa added.

Still, experts said you should try to walk a little more each time, if you can. Try getting off the bus a stop early, parking your car a bit further from the office or catching up with friends over a stroll.

"Some is better than none, more is better than some," said Dr Hannah Arem, an epidemiologist at MedStar Health Research Institute in Washington, US.

"It's about an incremental increase over time and trying to find those longer bouts to have more health benefits," Dr Arem said.



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