

Make Every Step Count by Ericka Kostka

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After I got married last fall, things changed, and not just for the better. Yes, I was happier, more connected, and had a best friend for life. We had a new apartment, our first home together. But there were mysterious side-effects. My energy level dropped. My body felt sluggish, confined. I put on a few pounds, although my weight had not changed for years. What was going on? Bridal lore suggests newlyweds gain weight because they're both cooking and dining out more. A good theory, but my husband and I had covered that while dating. My workout habits weren't any different, still four times a week, more or less. Then I went back to visit my old roommates and it clicked: Perhaps my new apartment was to blame. Crazy? I took the notion to Mark Fenton, WALKING'S editor at large. For years, Mark has delivered that message through clinics, conferences, TV appearances, and the pages of this magazine: For most people, "lifestyle fitness," not "workout fitness," is the most likely route to long-term health. Adding routine activity to our lives is as important as fitting in workouts. The thing was, I never thought about how the message applied to me; I unconsciously lived it. That is, until I moved. Now, instead of walking 15 minutes each way to the subway for my commute, I just stepped out the door. Where I once had to hoof it about a mile to accomplish anything, I now lived in one of the most convenient areas of the city. Grocery store, drugstore, dry cleaner, post office, movie theater, and restaurants of every description are located within a block or two. Short commute, handy take out sounds

ideal, right? Not for my fitness level. Without realizing it, I'd eliminated over an hour of activity a day. My metabolism was letting me know in its natural way, by slowing down. If I'm not careful, those couple of pounds could be only the beginning.

Mark gave me his best advice: add those missing steps back into my life. Then he handed me a pedometer to make sure I did.

Tracking: a trend

Turns out the health community has become increasingly vocal about the link between routine physical activity and maintaining good health, and physical activity and maintaining good health and an optimal weight. Researchers on the cutting edge are putting numbers to it, encouraging people to use pedometers to measure their daily walking the same way we keep track of distance or time while exercising.

In fact, research suggests there's a target for the amount of walking we should be doing each day. Studies show that 10,000 steps (roughly 5 miles) is a baseline for improving health and reducing risk of chronic disease. (See "Why 10K?" on page 4). What does that mean in real life? Most people average 3,000 to 6,000 steps a day in routine activity. To get the rest, we need an additional 35 to 45 minutes of walking at an average pace, about the amount of exercise recommended by the U.S. Surgeon General.

My curiosity was piqued. How many steps was I getting in a day? And how much walking did other

women do? To find out, Mark and I constructed a study. From my mother to Mark's sister-in-law to our editor-in-chief's sister, we asked relatives, friends and readers to help discover whether a pedometer is useful for tracking our steps and inspiring us to get more.

Pedometers are hardly new. For years they've been the active person's stocking stuffer, used briefly and abandoned. But that's changing. In Japan, it's estimated there are an average of three pedometers in every household. In the U.S., they're filtering into the mainstream as the best motivator going. Communities from Dallas to Minneapolis have been blitzed with radio ads soliciting volunteers for pedometer-based activity promotions. The devices have also become popular in weight loss and health clinics, and even in some school physical education classes.

Why the appeal? The promise of instant, accurate feedback. Unlike the old mechanical pedometers, the new electronic models are highly accurate for counting steps. (But not for measuring distance, which depends on stride length, a measure that changes according to your speed. Calorie measures are even less precise.)

Our eight women – including me – agreed to track our activity for a week to get a baseline. From there, we'd aim to boost our daily steps by 20% a week until we reached a level of activity that got our metabolisms in balance, our weights stable, and our energy levels up. These were normal, busy women. Some joined with no small amount of trepidation. Forget

10,000 steps a day – we weren't sure we'd even remember to wear our pedometers. But we were intrigued enough to try it for three weeks. What we found was a measure of inspiration.

Week 1: Finding our baseline

This week, we'd face the truth in hard numbers about how active we really were. The instructions were clear: don't make any changes to your normal routine. Just record the steps you take each day.

We all found pedometers unobtrusive and simple to use. Once clipped to a waistband, it's easy to forget they're there, silently recording each hip swing as a step. The only problem: They can swing right off. Short jackets, sweaters, and waist packs can ride up and dislodge them. We learned to keep an eye on them when using the bathroom. We found that pantyhose isn't thick enough to clip on to. After hers fell off, Mary Jane Kostek, 53, a speech therapist in three Springfield, Mass., public schools, engineered a solution. "I tied a string to it and looped it through my belt," she said. "Problem solved."

So wearing them was the easy part. The challenge came in recording our steps and making sense of the variances. Right away, we started seeing differences in our numbers from one day to the next. "A calendar is necessary for understanding your own patterns of activity," says Catrine Tudor-Locke, Ph.D., a research associate at the University of South Carolina's School of Public Health. "The whole concept of writing down your steps each day, week after week, is that over time you'll see where your lowest days are and think about why that is."

The very first day, Donna Brian, 46 a nurse practitioner and director of

a health center in Philadelphia, reached 10,500 steps. "Since I don't exercise, I was surprised to find I was getting so much activity in my normal life," she said. But on day 2 her experience was a little different. She drove to work instead of taking the train, sat in two meetings, and didn't walk several blocks for errands like she does every Monday. Her Tuesday total: 6,900. Turns out that first-day spike was the highest of her entire week.

Having an opportunity to get activity during the workday is an important contributor to high step counts. Mary Jane found her first week average was 8,500, even though she's never exercised. "I'm lucky because with my job I get steps walking up and down stairs to pick up students," she says. Her lowest day combined two of the top step stealers: driving and passive socializing. After a four-hour car trip and three-hour visit with her mother, her Sunday total was just 3,700 steps.

"It was shocking," she says. "I thought I had a busy day because I came home exhausted. Without the pedometer, I would have guessed I had done twice that easily."

Weekends, particularly Sundays, are low for many people, say the experts. While a desire to relax is normal, seeing two days' worth of sitting recorded on a pedometer can be eye-opening. Said Chandra Liggins, 40, a Tupperware manager and at-home mother of three in Brea, Calif., "I got almost no steps on weekends. I was embarrassed to write it down."

People are often surprised to learn they're not as active as they imagine they are at work, either. We may feel busy, but 3,000 to 5,000 steps is typical for office workers who drive to work, take an elevator, and don't exercise, says

Michelle Edwards of the Cooper Clinic in Dallas.

In the first week, Suzette Fenton, 38, averaged 5,500. Though a regular exerciser in the past, she is now so time-crunched she almost declined to be part of our story. "With work and two kids, it's not feasible to spend an hour working out," she says. Nor is it feasible for the investment counselor from Dallas to get much activity at work. "I carry heavy portfolios on appointments. It's not practical to park far from the door."

With an upcoming cruise with her husband planned, getting in shape soon was a goal. "After 30, it's harder to look good in a bathing suit," Suzette says of her decision to give the program a shot. She recruited coworker Chelsea Magby, 26, to join her. Says Chelsea, whose workday average was about the same as Suzette's, "I wanted to tone up and have more mommy energy. Walking is how I'd choose to do it. But that doesn't happen as often as I'd like."

Job demands and a new baby also put exercise out of reach for Katherine Craven-Kryzanski, 28, a Massachusetts legislative budget analyst who averaged 5,700 steps in her first week. Though unhappy about weight she's gained while pregnant, Katherine says, "I couldn't even think about getting back into shape. Before, when work would get crazy, I could walk after work or go to aerobics." Now, with a husband working long hours as a surgical resident, Katherine says, "I need to be there for my daughter."

Learning her average was lower than she'd expected – about 4,800 steps – was "a real shot in the arm" for Helen Smagorinsky, 67. She'd excused herself from exercise because of the time she spent caring for her elderly

parents. Then she saw the numbers. “That did it,” she says.

For me, the pedometer shone a light onto my personal mystery. I learned I can live an entire day – including a commute to work and some errands – and walk only 4,000 steps. Revisiting my old, pre-marriage route, I discovered that I used to walk 4,000 steps to and from the train alone. What was once my daily minimum was now at times my total.

The feedback galvanized us to increase. “Just one day of looking at my steps made me think of all the things could do to get more,” says Suzette. “I’m one of those people who drives around for 10 minutes looking for a parking space. I think I could work on that.”

Even people around us were inspired. “Now that I’ve been doing this, the whole family wants to wear the pedometer,” says Donna. “They all want to know how much they’re getting.”

Week 2: The 20% boost

We’d reached a critical phase. Here’s where we’d either accept the challenge to increase by 20% or we’d tire of the toy and toss it in a drawer. Yes, we’d heard a million times that we should park at the farthest end of the mall parking lot. But now that we had a way to get credit for it, we might actually do it.

Adding activity is often a matter of making life a little more inconvenient. Rather than grab coffee across the street from work, for example, Katherine walked to another Starbucks to get in some hill walking. The pedometer prodded her to compete with herself. “You start thinking, ‘I can increase over yesterday,’” she says. When she realized many of her new trips were related to food, she walked instead to the bank or

to visit her daughter at daycare a few blocks away. “I didn’t want to undo the extra walking.”

Housework became another theme, as we discovered ways to intensify tasks we were doing already. Said Helen, “I no longer make attempts to save steps. If I need to bring something to the basement, I don’t put it off until I’m going anyway. I just do it faster so I don’t waste time taking more trips.”

Helen’s real breakthrough was tackling errands on foot instead of automatically jumping into her car. Her goal: get fit enough to keep pace with her husband, a lifelong walker. “He’s proud of me for walking to a friend’s house,” she says. “I’ve never done that before.”

All of this is in line with the new thinking in the health community: fitness is not limited to gym time or our morning walk. The pedometers let us see our daily lives as opportunities to be active.

Besides adding steps to everything she did – like walking the aisles of a grocery store rather than making a beeline to what she needed – Chelsea also made time for active fun. An evening dancing with her husband and friends earned steps. So did going to a parade with her family. “I’m trying different activities. I did my first yoga class this week,” she says.

She did not change her workday habits, though. “I didn’t want to cut my efficiency at the office. I won’t make trips to the copier for every little thing. One thing I did try was standing rather than sitting whenever I can so I can pace a bit.”

Pacing also helped Donna boost her average. Already active at work, she found it easier to add steps outside of her job. She paced the aisles of a Home Depot and the platform at the train

station. “It’s wasted time anyway,” she says. “I might as well be moving.”

For Suzette, the challenge of week 2 set a more formal plan in motion. Sometimes she drove home to walk at lunch. Other times she left work a bit earlier. “I’m so inspired. I learned in the first week that if I do nothing but work and go home, I’m in the 3,500 to 5,000 range,” she says. “But if I add a half-hour walk, I can bump that up by 4,500 steps.”

We all agreed watching our steps accumulate was satisfying. We found ourselves checking the pedometers now and then during the day. “If I’m not where I want to be by a certain time, I know I need to pick it up,” says Mary Jane. “One night at 7 p.m. I had only 5,500, so I cleaned the garage.” She became familiar with the step counts of routine activities. “Vacuuming or organizing my work files adds 1,500. Bowling adds 3,000. It helps to see them building throughout the day.”

Veterans of other fitness plans praised step counting as a positive rather than a negative motivator. “I like the idea of counting up steps rather than worrying about how many pounds I’ve lost that week,” says Katherine. “It’s a relief just to concentrate on getting more steps.”

Chelsea agrees. “I don’t like being told to exercise. This is a way to be self-starting and self-motivating.”

For Chandra, the pedometer was a gentle reminder to stick with her better habits. “I noticed if I didn’t walk my boys to school, my steps were really, down,” she says. “Even though it’s sometimes more convenient to drive, it has me thinking it’s worth the effort to walk.”

Exactly right, I told myself as I escaped an overpacked train three

stops early one evening and walked home. I didn't have to check my pedometer to know it was 15 minutes better spent.

Week 3: We need to do even more?

Now the real challenge. The instructions for week 3 asked us to boost our steps by another 20%. Did we have to do more? Well, most of us hadn't reached 10,000 steps yet. Besides, that goal of 10,000 steps is really just a benchmark for better health. There are plenty of good reasons to go beyond that – and really no reason not to.

A few of us now concluded that in order to increase again we needed to combine the lifestyle and workout approaches, setting aside time specifically for walking. For Helen, back pain that left her unable to reach her target for two days was the catalyst. "I realized I didn't just need to walk more, I needed a program," she says.

A painter in her at-home studio, Helen is even less active than most office workers. Though working at home is a fantasy for many, research suggests that after formal exercise, simply getting out of the house is the most important factor in getting more steps.

As a remedy, Helen resolved to take regular walking breaks. "I've always wanted to learn Italian. Language tapes will be my incentive to put work aside."

Mary Jane also realized she can't consistently reach her goal without formal exercise. "I can't get there without walking a half-hour on the treadmill," she says. She's tried replacing inactive time with walking time. "Before plunking on the couch to watch TV or read, I check where I am. If I'm low, I watch my show on the treadmill."

Some days, though, she just won't get the steps. That's fine, says Fenton. Part of the appeal of lifestyle activity is that it's flexible. Instead of holding ourselves to taking a certain number of steps each day, we should aim for a high average level of activity over the course of a week.

Welcome words for Katherine, who boosted her average to nearly 8,000 steps from a baseline of 5,700 by using stairs instead of the elevator, delivering messages instead of sending e-mails, and walking farther for errands. It's a level she's satisfied with for now. "It's better than where I was," she says. And more importantly, "I can get it done while working. It's the only way I'll do it."

Still going strong, Suzette says, "My mood is better. I've lost 4 pounds. Already my body is tighter." Her real success, though, was discovering there is time in her life for activity. She credits the pedometer for giving her motivation and her husband for making it possible. "Rob has been so supportive. He encourages me to get the steps. He hasn't minded being alone with the kids a little longer."

For me, replacing activity I'd lost was a matter of expanding my landscape. Switching train stops adds 3,000 steps. Walking to meet friends for dinner adds 1,000. With a little awareness, I've boosted my average closer to 10K without needing to fit another workout into my week. Thanks to the pedometer, I was back where I began.

And beyond

Would we keep using the pedometers? The consensus was yes. Says Chelsea, "I'll keep wearing it. It's a little, inoffensive reminder to get your tush out of the chair."

Suzette says the feedback fits her personality. "In sales, we have dollar-for-dollar goals. You can't know where you are if you don't have real numbers. Same with being active."

Helen intends to continue recording her steps for a year. "I hope the three weeks have motivated me for good," she says.

Not everyone, though, plans to keep wearing it. "The pedometer has been helpful and I wouldn't mind wearing it all the time," says Donna. "But I have to share I have a line of people who want to try it."

Why 10K?

Where did 10K come from? In Japan pedometers are nicknamed *manpo-kei*, which means 10,000 steps meter. This name led to the assumption that 10,000 steps a day of walking is a healthy idea.

It turns out to be right, according to a growing body of evidence. Research by Ralph Paffenbarger of Stanford University and others established that those who burn at least 2,000 calories in conscious activity a week (climbing stairs, walking, and formal exercise) show vastly better health profiles and longevity than sedentary people.

Then Japanese researcher Yoshiro Hatano found that 10,000 steps of walking burns roughly 300 to 450 calories. (Fast walkers burned more.) This means a person who averages 10K a day will over the course of a week, likely end up in the health-promoting range of around 2,100 to 3,100 calories burned walking.