

What's the least you can do and still be healthy? The lazy fitness guide

Good news! You don't need to do 10,000 steps a day or more than two sessions of cardio a week. By Peta Bee

The busy person — as well as the idle — will be delighted to learn that there has been scientific research into an important question: what's the least amount of exercise you can get away with without seeing a steep decline in fitness levels? The answer, according to the authors of a review published recently in *The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research (JSCR)*, is that you can cut cardio sessions to as little as 13 minutes twice a week and reduce resistance training to once weekly without risking a catastrophic downturn in fitness.

For their investigation researchers from the United States Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine, along with exercise scientists from universities in Spain and Chile, looked at how low you can feasibly go with your workouts before fitness starts to subside. Their conclusion: you can make "large reductions in exercise frequency and volume", provided that you put in some effort when you do your minimised workout sessions each week.

But there are caveats. They looked only at studies in which participants had been exercising consistently for four weeks and at the effects on fitness parameters, not on weight loss or health. "If you are unfit to start with, you can't get away with doing less and should still be aiming for more time on your feet every day," says Dr Theodoris Ispoglou, a reader in nutrition and muscle health at Leeds Beckett University.

Still, the message is that if you exercise regularly you can get away with doing much less and still stay fit. "The concept of minimal dose exercise is a huge trend in elite sport and we are studying how professional footballers can minimise weekly strength training sessions when they have to play two matches a week as well as fit in other training," says Dr Dave Clark, a senior lecturer in strength and conditioning at Liverpool John Moores University's school of sport and exercise sciences. "But the idea that we can minimise exercise is filtering down to general fitness."

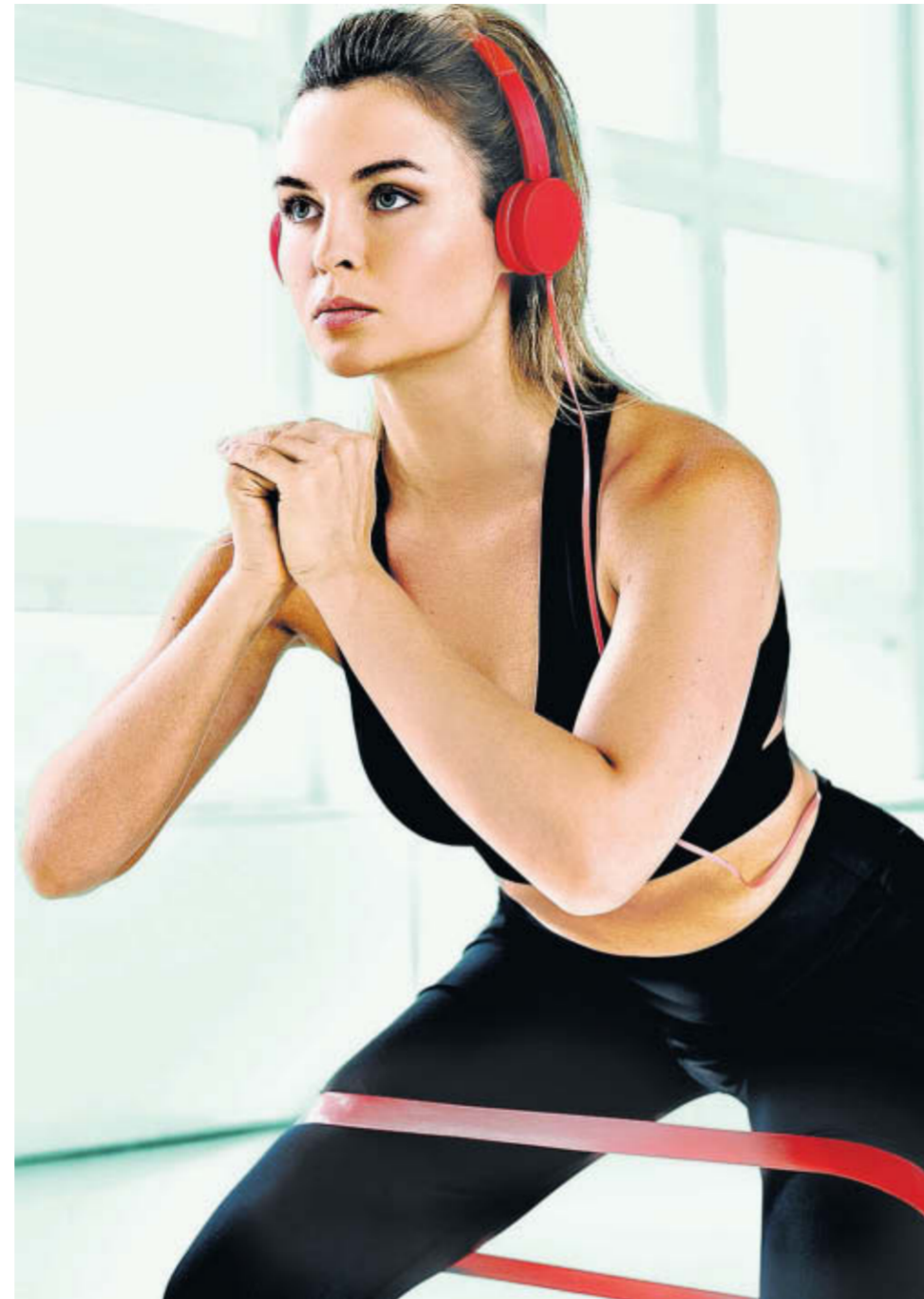
Aerobic: you need only 13 minutes twice a week

Government recommendations state that we should aim for 150 minutes a week of moderate intensity activity (walking, cruising on a bike) or 75 minutes a week of vigorous exercise (running, fast swimming, skipping). But according to the new *JSCR* study, a level of endurance fitness can be maintained for up to 15 weeks on as few as two cardio sessions a week, or, if you usually do a 45 to 60-minute workout, it can be cut to as low as 13-26 minutes per session.

What matters, they point out, is that the intensity (or the heart rate reached) of reduced workouts is high — that means all-out effort on runs or HIIT (high-intensity interval training) sessions. "If someone chooses to exercise only twice weekly but for 15 minutes each time, they have to exercise at relatively high intensity of about 70 to 85 per cent of their maximum heart rate," Ispoglou says. "Or they can exercise for 30 minutes at a slightly lower but still challenging intensity of 50 to 75 per cent of their maximum heart rate."

Weights: once a week

If you have been lifting weights consistently, strength can be maintained without any training for up to three to four weeks. "Strictly speaking you can temporarily lose strength before this but it comes back so quickly during retraining that it doesn't matter," Ispoglou says. "However, it gradually declines beyond this point if



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you do nothing. That said, you can maintain any strength gains with one good session a week."

In the *JSCR* paper the team found that muscle strength and size can be maintained for up to 32 weeks with a single bout of strength training each week and just one set of repetitions per exercise (older exercisers might need to do more to maintain muscle size, but even so it meant only up to two strength sessions a week).

According to a soon-to-be-published study involving 14,690 participants, once a week might be enough in the longer term. For this latest paper, researchers from Solent University's faculty of sport, health and social sciences and the Uktactive Research Institute looked at the effects of a once-weekly 20-minute strength training session comprising six exercises performed slowly (ten seconds up, ten seconds down) on gym machines — chest press, abdominal flexion, back extension, hip adduction, pull down and leg press — over almost seven years. Their results showed that the ultra-minimalist strength plan produced 30 per cent strength gains in the first year, rising to 50 per cent at the end of the study, enough to make a positive difference to muscle and general health.

McPhee says that we should balance on one leg daily, eyes open to start with, then progressing to eyes closed until we can manage 30 seconds on each leg. "Then try squatting down on one leg or moving your centre of mass by swaying on one leg with eyes closed," he says. "Challenge your balance every day."

Steps: you don't need 10,000 a day

A daily total of 10,000 steps is the default goal of activity trackers and considered a pinnacle of daily achievement. "Step counts are very arbitrary and we don't yet know the minimum requirement," says Dr Juliette Strauss, a senior lecturer in

exercise and health metabolism at Liverpool John Moores University.

Certainly science suggests that health benefits come when a much lower level of daily steps is accumulated. Two years ago a team from Harvard Medical School looked at data from 17,000 older women who had worn an activity tracker for a week between 2011 and 2015. Reporting in the journal *JAMA Internal Medicine*, they found that those who did 4,500 daily steps were also about 40 per cent less likely to have died than counterparts who managed only 2,700. Walking pace and intensity didn't affect the outcome.

Others have suggested that 5,500 steps for men is sufficient to bring about health benefits, while taking 4,000 extra daily steps (for a daily total of 8,000) was shown to cut in half the risk of dying early from heart disease, cancer or any other cause by researchers at the US National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last year.

There's no proof that warm-up stretches prevent injury

Are you one of those people who spends ten minutes stretching before a gym session or run? You'd be better of ditching it in favour of other warm-up activities.

There's little evidence that pre-workout static stretching (ie holding the stretch) helps to protect against injuries — indeed, some researchers believe that being too flexible raises the risk of getting hurt. And several years ago a Cochrane review found that stretching before or after a workout does little to prevent muscle soreness.

"There's definitely no need to include static stretching in a warm-up and there is evidence that it might even undermine your performance in high-intensity sessions involving sprints or weights," Clark says. "When you hold a stretch it increases the laxity of the muscles and tendons and throws the muscle into a protective mode in which it temporarily loses its capacity to exert maximal force."

What to do instead? If you are heading out for a run or cycle the advice is simply to start at a slower pace and gradually allow your body to warm up. For more intense workouts Strauss says to raise your body temperature by doing the activity (or similar) that will form the bulk of your main workout — so jogging, skipping, swimming, cycling — at a lower intensity for several minutes before adding some "dynamic exercises that use similar movement patterns and increase range of motion (leg swings before running, high knees before cycling, side steps for tennis) that are more effective than static stretching". Then add brief five to ten-second bursts of high-intensity effort before breaking into the workout proper.

You don't really need to cool down

Spending a chunk of your workout time cooling down is not necessary and, in a paper published in the journal *Sports Medicine*, Dr Jonathan Peake, a lecturer at the school of biomedical sciences at Queensland University of Technology, and Bas Van Hooren, a sport scientist, reported that "active cool-downs are largely ineffective for improving most psychophysiological markers of post-exercise recovery".

What you shouldn't do is stop suddenly, especially after a really hard workout. Strauss says the best approach is to "gradually reduce exercise intensity and therefore heart rate as you finish your exercise". In other words, slow down for the last few minutes: cool down accomplished.

Have you got re-entry anxiety? How to cope socially: the therapist's rules

As lockdown lifts and we go back into the world, it's normal to feel "re-entry anxiety", says the leading psychotherapist Julia Samuel. Her new podcast, *A Living Loss: the Art of Losing and Finding Yourself* — about the grief we feel when our lives undergo abrupt change that we can't control — couldn't be more timely. But, says Samuel, who was a close friend of Princess Diana and remains a mentor to Princes William and Harry, we can help ourselves negotiate this challenging time.

Re-entry anxiety is normal. Not everyone is raring to get back out there

Surely we should be keen to get back to normal? Samuel says: "We're wired to look for danger and in the modern day, that's anything unfamiliar. So it takes as much psychological energy to unlock as it did to lock down. We have the capacity to adapt and change, but that process is always experienced at one end, as discomfort, at the other, real fear."

If you're worried your social reticence is upsetting your friends, Samuel says, "Be honest. Say, 'I really want to see you. I've missed you.' (Not by text if possible. Pick up the phone.) Start with the positive, so they feel loved. Then say, 'But I'm a bit scared. I'm acclimatising to going out, and I feel uneasy about putting too much in my diary, because I think it will make me panic. Be patient with me — I can't wait to see you. But I have to go at my own pace.' They'll probably say, 'Oh same as me. Thank goodness you said that!'"

Take it slowly — you don't have to act the moment a rule relaxes

Everyone has their default response to change, Samuel says. "You can't fight who you are. You need to support yourself." Acknowledge your emotions. "I've got butterflies. The idea of going to a bar and meeting four people is terrifying." Turn to yourself with compassion. "OK. What is my window of tolerance? What small step feels manageable?"

However, supporting yourself doesn't mean limiting yourself. Even if you feel self-conscious and awkward, that will change with gentle practice. Write down how you feel. "Get the words out, so you can see them on a page. 'Frightened. Help! Then say to yourself, 'What do I need?'" That might be a hug, or a cup of tea.

Disrupt anxiety with exercise

"Cortisol levels rise when we're anxious, and that sets our body into fight or flight or freeze," Samuel says. But we can lower that heightened state. "If you do a breathing exercise for five minutes, breathe in for the count of seven, and out for the count of 11, you will feel calmer." She adds: "Exercise tells your body you have flown. It reduces your levels of cortisol. You feel



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safer." No need for a 10k run. A 15-minute walk, or a few yoga stretches is effective.

The Butterfly Hug is one of many calming exercises on Samuel's Instagram page (@juliasamuembe), and is particularly useful if you feel frozen and panicky. It's a two-minute exercise designed to make you feel warmer and more connected. "Close your eyes, take a big breath in through your nose, out through your mouth. Think of a place you feel safe in, imagine it," she says, or recall a memory where you felt warmth, connection, love. Then cross your arms over your chest, and pat your shoulders — one, then the other. "Tap it in." Pause. Do another round if need be. "That slows your whole system down."

How to handle socialising sensitively

There's tension in returning to formal socialising when some acquaintances baked banana bread while others suffered greatly — and you don't know which. "Be sensitive to others' experience by asking a general question, not making assumptions," Samuel says. She prefers, "How was your lockdown?"

Understand that if people are bereaved, she notes, this time will make them feel newly bereaved. "Their perception is that everyone else is going back to 'normal' and their normal has been ripped apart. So they feel raw."

It's not irrational to fear going to parties

There's been a message of "People are danger! Stay away!" every day, everywhere, for a year, Samuel says. "To dare to trust that people are not life-threatening as they walk towards you is a big adaptation process." If Samuel were advising someone with agoraphobia, she'd tell them to build up very slowly. Similarly, we should negotiate re-entry in a way that doesn't overwhelm us. "Go to the

edge of your comfort zone," she says. If you push yourself too far, too fast, you'll feel dreadful, which will create a mental barrier to repeating it.

Rather than meet a group, says Samuel, "Go for a walk with a friend and have a cup of tea outside. Go on doing that until it feels comfortable. You develop habits by making them regular."

Manage uncertainty by cultivating hope

We crave certainty, says Samuel, that all will be well. "But where certainty ends, hope begins. You have to let go of certainty, to hope that we're going to be okay. Hope is an energy for change." Tiny habits can have profound effects. "Making small changes and discovering that the sky doesn't fall in gives you the confidence to trust. It's an evolving process."

If your instinct is against a crazy diary, pay attention

Anxiety about returning to a frantic lifestyle is significant. "Being busy is an anaesthetic that stops you connecting with yourself and what matters to you," Samuel says. The "fertile void" of lockdown gave us time to think and feel. You might look at your old diary and think, "I don't want that again." It no longer feels like a badge of honour — "a badge of honour is spending time with people you care about." To avoid reverting to old patterns, make small, manageable changes, she says. Ask, "What's a boundary I can set to protect me from being that busy?" And prioritise one goal to support a structure that suits you better. "I'll see a friend every week — or whatever I can manage."

By Anna Maxted

A Living Loss: the Art of Losing and Finding Yourself podcast with Julia Samuel is available from all major podcast providers

“If you're scared, be honest with your friends. Say 'I can't wait to see you, but I have to go at my own pace'”



Julia Samuel