

Stair Climbing for health

How Quickly You Climb Stairs Can Indicate How Long You'll Live

Here's what you should do if you can't go up four flights of stairs in under a minute

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Wondering if you're at risk of heart disease or cancer? Your answer could be on a set of stairs.

A new study presented at the European Society of Cardiology says an exercise test requiring brisk movement can predict your risk of early death from cardiovascular and oncologic diseases, among other illnesses.

Most people can easily replicate this test at home without any medical equipment. To do so, simply time yourself briskly climbing four flights of stairs.

A healthy individual should be able to complete the test in under one minute.

"This study reinforces the notion that exercise is really helpful for both cardiovascular and oncologic disease," Dr. Andrew Freeman, director of cardiovascular prevention and wellness at National Jewish Health and a member of the American College of Cardiology's Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease Section Leadership Council, told Healthline.

"We've known for a long time when we're making pre-operative assessments to see if someone's heart can make it through surgery, one of the things we ask before we do testing is, 'How much can you do? Can you go up a flight of stairs?'" Freeman said.

He further explained that one's ability to climb stairs is a good indicator that in all likelihood their surgery should come off relatively smoothly.

It makes sense that brisk exercise can indicate risk factors for cardiovascular issues, but what's the connection to cancer?

"It's also been known for a while that exercise is a wonderful adjunct to cancer treatment therapy and may even serve as a preventive," Freeman explained.

What to Do If You Fail the Test

"As is well-known, many famous businessmen have taught us that the best teacher is failure," Freeman said, "so people should use a poor stair test result to visit with the doctor, do the appropriate diagnostic workup if needed, and get to the bottom of whatever may be limiting."

After being evaluated, Freeman suggests using the failure as incentive to get into better physical shape.

He added that extenuating circumstances such as arthritis and orthopedic conditions can limit one's ability.

For these people, he suggests using the test as a barometer of overall physical health.

Aim for Breathlessness

Breathlessness seems like something to avoid, but Freeman argues the exact opposite.

“The standard advice I give to my patients is: You should attempt to get 30 minutes every day at a level of exercise that you are breathless,” he said.

The payoff of this daily breathlessness is a healthier, longer life.

“Exercise is, in fact, probably one of the best treatments for virtually almost every disease out there,” Freeman said.

He added that “some of the most powerful tools we have are the things we take for granted: what we do every day in terms of exercise, how we eat, stress, how much sleep, etc.”

For some people, 30 minutes of breathlessness could take much longer to achieve at first.

“So, for instance, the elderly person who barely gets out of their chair when they walk to the door, they might find their heart rate at target heart rate. I don’t want them to use that,” Freeman said.

Instead, Freeman wants them to aim for breathless, “which means that while they’re walking, when they are breathless, that’s where I want them to stay for as long as they can, five, 10 minutes or more.”

Breaks to catch breath are permitted as necessary, but the goal is that those pauses become shorter and fewer.

For those with significant limitations, Freeman advises finding an activity that fits their ability, such as swimming or using an elliptical.

They should then challenge themselves to improve.

The Bottom Line

Climbing four flights of stairs can indicate your risk for early death from heart disease, cancer, and other illnesses.

If you fail the test, it is an opportunity to speak with your doctor to discover why and develop an exercise plan that includes daily breathlessness.

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