Walking more than five flights of stairs a day can cut risk of heart disease by 20%, study says

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Stairs are a low-cost, accessible way to potentially reduce the risk of heart disease, according to a new study. (Photo by iStock)

Forget walking 10,000 steps a day. Taking at least 50 steps up the stairs each day could significantly slash your risk of heart disease, according to a new study from Tulane University.

The research, published in *Atherosclerosis*, found that climbing more than five flights of stairs daily could reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease by 20%. Atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease (ASCVD), along with coronary artery disease and stroke, are leading causes of death worldwide.

“Short bursts of high-intensity stair climbing are a time-efficient way to improve cardiorespiratory fitness and lipid profile, especially among those unable to achieve the current physical activity recommendations,” said study corresponding author Dr. Lu Qi, HCA Regents Distinguished Chair and professor at the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. “These findings highlight the potential advantages of stair climbing as a primary preventive measure for ASCVD in the general population.”

Using data collected from more than 450,000 adults in the UK Biobank, the study calculated participants’ susceptibility to cardiovascular disease based on family history, genetic risk factors and established risk factors such as high blood pressure and history of smoking. Participants were also surveyed about their lifestyle habits and frequency of stair climbing. The median follow-up time was 12.5 years.

The study found that climbing more stairs daily especially reduced the risk of cardiovascular disease in those who were less susceptible. However, Qi said the increased risk of heart disease in more susceptible people could be “effectively offset” by daily stair climbing.

Researchers also found that those who stopped climbing stairs daily during the study showed a 32% higher risk of cardiovascular disease compared to those who never reported climbing stairs.

Qi touted the public availability of stairs as a low-cost, accessible way to incorporate exercise into daily routines.

“This study provides novel evidence for the protective effects of stair climbing on the risk of ASCVD, particularly for individuals with multiple ASCVD risk factors,” Qi said.