It's the simplest form of fitness. Now many experts think it's the best. Walking is good for your brain, your heart and your mood. Peta Bee explains why a daily walk is the best thing you can do for your health.

** Turn your walk into a workout **

Add in short bursts of speed

Try adding 30-second or one-minute sprints into your walk. "You will naturally get faster as you get aerobically fitter," says Greg Whyte, professor of applied sport and exercise science at Liverpool John Moores University.

Take some hills

Adding hills to the walking equation will take the intensity up several notches. Calorie burn can increase by as much as 60 per cent compared with walking on flat ground and it is likely you will burn at least 140 calories per unit walking mile. What's more, hills provide resistance and will strengthen muscles everywhere, particularly in the buttocks and legs.

Make your walk longer or harder each time

Build up to 5 miles (around 90 minutes or 10,000 steps) of moderate walking and then progress from there. The longer you keep it up and the more you do, the more pronounced the health benefits of walking.

"This is key," says Whyte. "You need incremental increases in time, distance or intensity so that it makes you work harder over time. You want to avoid hitting a fitness plateau. Mix up your walking, adding more variety to challenge yourself. The harder you walk, the less distance or number of steps you need to take to reap the benefits of walking."

It does, the less risk of developing functioning difficulties.

While walking has always had healthy benefits, adding a stroll to your daily routine is more important than ever. As our life styles become ever more sedentary, research is increasingly showing how bad this is for our longevity. Some scientists are now saying that the modern culture of sitting at a desk all day is as detrimental to health as smoking and drinking excessively.

In a study by the University of Cambridge this year, scientists found that workers who barely moved from their desks for eight hours were 60 per cent more likely to die than those who moved around more.

Walking is emerging as a potent weapon. "It's the best form of defence we have against the onslaught of sedentarism," says Greg Whyte, professor of applied sport and exercise science at Liverpool John Moores University. Recent data has shown how substituting one hour of sitting with one hour of walking results in a 13 per cent drop in all-cause mortality. You live longer, in other words.

Indeed, only 25 minutes of brisk walking a day could add up to seven years to your life, experts claimed in research presented at the European Society of Cardiology congress last year by Surajit Sharma, the professor of uninfarcted cardiac diseases in sport cardiology at St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and said it could halve the risk of heart attack death among those in those in the most fit group. "You do less, exercise moderately, you reduce your risk of dying from a heart attack when you're in your lifetimes and sixties by 50 per cent."

So what is it about walking that makes it so effective? Certainly, it helps to shred fat by burning calories at an average rate of 81 calories per mile at a moderate pace (more if you move faster). It helps to strengthen muscles in the legs, buttocks and core. As you walk, the forces of each stride stress the bones in a positive way so that bone cells respond by creating more tissue and strengthening the skeleton. Also it is obviously something our bodies are designed to do.

Stephan Ziolkowski, a researcher in the Centre for Active Lifestyles at Leeds Beckett University, says, "Anthropologically, humans are designed to solve problems while walking for up to 14 hours per day." Ziolkowski says, "Yet many people spend almost that amount of time sitting instead. And this seems to be a growing issue as we age."

Surveys by the Department for Transport show the average person now walks 118 miles a year — less than half a mile a day and a drop of 63 miles since 1996. It is not just our bodies that respond with remarkable effect. A regular walk three times a week has been shown to increase the size of brain regions linked to planning and memory over the course of a year. Thus it helps to slow the brain shrinkage and weakening mental skills that occur as we age. Neurologists at the University of Miami recently suggested that people who don't walk or do some form of light exercise experience a cognitive decline equivalent to ten more years of ageing compared with those who are active. Others have shown that people who walk for at least six miles a week may protect brain size and, in turn, preserve memory in old age.

The speed at which people can walk in old age has been shown to be a determining factor in detecting Alzheimer's disease. Researchers at the University Hospital in Toulouse found an association between the slow walking speed of elderly people and a build-up of plaque associated with the disease in several areas of the brain. Those who walked at an average pace (1.38 feet per second) or faster were less likely to have the disease hallmark. "The mental benefits of walking are phenomenal," says Whyte. "There is so much proof that walking outdoors improves mood and helps alleviate mild depression by helping to balance brain chemicals."

So if we want to increase the amount of walking we do, where should we start? Recently, 10,000 daily steps have been widely touted as the goal to aim for, but Whyte says it is better to work to individual goals. Indeed, a new study showed how
‘It’s most liberating to the spirit’
Matthew Parris

I’ve been walking since the age of four. I run away from home and get as far as the eucalyptus trees by the main road out of Nicotia before being apprehended in my break for freedom. Funny, really, that what’s undoubtedly the most pedestrian form of locomotion also feels the most liberating to the spirit. In my dreams of escape I am forever walking, unburdened, towards a distant, flat horizon.

And what can come closer to that dream than walking in a desert? There’s something pure about desert walking; one foot in front of the other, stripped of distraction, the art of walking reduced to the barest of essentials.

You really climb, you don’t scramble, you don’t march, you never stumble and you never, never, run. There’s no watching your step, searching for a foothold, worrying about balance or wondering how to get through. Polis or sticks would only be an encumbrance, and legs do what legs do while the mind can decouple. Float free, scan the skyline.

A to B is almost always a straight line, and you can usually see B from A before you start. Distance can be estimated at a glance. Rhythm — that most subtle of pleasures and the wings to any hiker’s heels — comes easy.

And the thing about walking in hot, dry deserts is that it needn’t be all that hot, you needn’t be thirsty, it won’t rain, and when you want to sleep you only need a pillow. In short, walking the desert is quite walking.

My Saharan walks with Arab guides have been four or five day journeys that typically involved only about ten miles a day walking and nighttime stops for meal, snacks, lemonade and water. Nothing can beat it. I love the English hills, the Derbyshire Dales, the open slopes of the Pyrenees, and in places such as these I intend to keep walking until, at 70, God willing, I get new knees.

But the desert is my favourite. For, as desert travellers will endlessly tell you, the desert is many deserts, and only rarely a flat, monotonous waste. The big picture is flat, but within the big picture you can connect small pictures, many landscapes in a single day — hills, rock gorges, oases, rolling gravel plains, and immense expanses of desert too. And the surroundings change constantly.

The walking itself is surprisingly gentle. There are no great slopes, no unyielding mountain slopes, and if you do tire — although few of my companions ever have — there’s usually a camel or two following the group that (with complaining mors, and farting alarmingly) carry you swaying across the sand until you conclude that it’s actually more pleasant to walk.

Serious walkers know to pace themselves; never to get breathless or hurry in the heat; to try to break into a sweat as infrequently as possible; to cover your skin — no bare heads, legs or arms — in loose-fitting, light cotton; and to see your environment not as a fearful, hellish threat, but as a beautiful and fragile place, to be respected and worked with, not against.

Climbing in Scotland and Spain, hill-walking in England, even walking the country roads of Derbyshire, I have so many memories of biting off more than I could chew, of getting exhausted, horribly overheated, or uncomfortably chilly, memories of racing pulse, panting for breath, sweating, shivering and forever potting layers on and taking layers off.

Desert walking — partly because you know from the start that you’re taking on something much bigger than you, from which rescue would not be straightforward, and you must keep well within your capabilities at all times — turns into a gentler and more level experience. I’ve had days in the Sahara when my pulse rarely quickened.

And the nights! Our Saharan guides would try to arrange that there was sand where we sleep. Scoop out a little depression for your tip, lay out a blanket, put down your pillow — and that’s it. The feeling of being completely exposed is at first strange, even uncomfortable, horribly exposed, but by the time your trip is over and you return home, it will be your first night enclosed in a bedroom that feels all wrong. Now you are trapped again. But you can dream down, down, of a bed that’s only a blanket, from which you rise and walk across a landscape without walls, to a distant horizon. That’s the meaning of a walk in the desert.

‘I walk 12 miles a day, I’m hooked’
Polly Vernon

To avoid walking — serious walking — is another way. One morning, the bus I relied on to take me to work didn’t come. Exasperated, I started walking the bus route, assuming my arrival at one or other of the later stops would coincide with the arrival of the bus. It didn’t. So I walked on, and on, and finally arrived at my office on foot — a little bluette, a little sweaty, but triumphant, and only half an hour later than I would have been had my bus arrived when it was supposed to.

So the next day I walked the bus route again. And the day after. And the day after that. Within a fortnight I was hooked. There was such a complete ease to walking, something so liberating about opting out of the push, the stress and crush of the London transport system. More than anything else, there was something so incredibly sensible, so natural about it, that I couldn’t have stopped walking had I wanted to. Which I didn’t. When, a couple of weeks after that, I began to register fully the impact walking was having on my body — how it was toning my thighs, lifting my bum, flattening my stomach — well, I started walking home too.

Now, 7 years into my walking habit, 17 years of averaging 12½ miles — about 25,000 steps — a day, I would describe myself as a raving walking addict.

Walking is central to my wellbeing. It is the thing I factor into my daily schedule with as much dedication as I do sleep and food. On the incredibly rare occasions I really can’t walk — because I have to catch an early flight somewhere, say — I will be in a foul mood as a consequence.

What does walking do for me? It keeps me thin. People who walk are more likely to lose weight, and maintain weight loss, than those who do any other form of exercise. Also, it has infinitely more purpose than any machine you’re likely to find in a gym. That’s all pretty obvious. Perhaps less obvious are the mental health benefits of walking. Walking is meditative, it is an endorphin-releasing. It reconnects you with the physical world you inhabit, it shows you stuff you’d otherwise miss: skies, the tilting on the front of pubs, errant puppies. For all these reasons, walking calms me absolutely. I can start a walk in any sort of mood — angry, grumpy, hangover, beerbreakers, overburdened, grieving, hyped and giddy — and within 20 minutes of one foot hitting the pavement, of then weaving through traffic and cutting through parks — I will be OK. I will be calm. I will even be appreciating contentment.

When you walk, you expose an hour or two of guaranteed, uninterrupted sanity into your day. All you need is sturdy trainers, a sturdy umbrella and an extra half-hour or so, time stolen back from aimless internet trawling.