

# Ten minutes counts

A short book about skipping exercise because you can't do  
the full session, and so doing none

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can  
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

# Contents

1. Before you start
2. Twenty-five minutes on a Tuesday
3. Why "properly" feels right
4. "It wouldn't do anything"
5. "It has to be in one go"
6. "I wouldn't feel any better for it"
7. "By the time I've got changed"
8. "A short one is cheating"
9. How one missed Tuesday becomes a missed month
10. It doesn't have to hurt
11. "But I want to get fit"
12. Where the ten minutes goes
13. "Strength needs a gym"
14. The decision
15. Colds, bad knees and weeks that fall apart
16. Tuesday again
17. Notes

## Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You mean to exercise. You have a picture of what a proper session is, which might be forty-five minutes at the gym, a five-kilometre run or a class. On the day, something eats into the time. There's only twenty minutes left, and twenty minutes isn't a proper session, so you do nothing. You'll go properly on Thursday. This happens often enough that the weeks with no exercise in them outnumber the weeks with some.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the standard you're holding yourself to is understandable. For years the official advice really did say that exercise only counted in blocks of a certain length. The second is that the standard is wrong, and the advice has changed. The research of the last fifteen years is unusually clear that short amounts of movement are worth having. The biggest health gain on the whole scale comes from the step between nothing and a little. The third is practical. One rule removes most of the zeros from your week. On any day when you can't do the full session, you do ten minutes, and it counts. Chapters 11 to 13 cover how.

A few things this book isn't. It isn't a training plan. It won't get you ready for a marathon, and chapter 10 is plain about what ten minutes can't do. It doesn't argue against long sessions either. If you like your forty-five minutes at the gym, keep them. This book is about what happens on the days when they don't happen. It isn't a weight-loss book. I make no claims about weight at all.

Four cautions.

The NHS advises speaking to your GP first if you haven't exercised for some time, or if you have medical conditions or concerns. That applies to ten minutes as much as to an hour. It also says to make sure the activity and its intensity suit your fitness.

If you get chest pain, stop. The NHS says to call 999 if you have sudden chest pain or discomfort that doesn't go away, pain that spreads to your arm, neck, jaw, stomach or back, or chest pain with sweating, sickness, light-headedness or shortness of breath. Chest pain that comes and goes still needs medical advice.

If you're pregnant, have recently had a baby, or live with a long-term condition or disability, the general message of this book still holds, but the details differ. The NHS and the World Health Organization both publish guidance for these groups, and your GP, midwife or physiotherapist can advise you.

And if your difficulty runs the other way, this book isn't for you. If you feel compelled to exercise, get anxious when you can't, or use exercise to make up for eating, please talk to a GP. The NHS lists exercising too much among the features of some eating disorders, and the charity Beat offers support.

The notes at the back give the studies I've relied on and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

## Twenty-five minutes on a Tuesday

It's Tuesday, and the plan was the gym at six.

You pay thirty-four pounds a month for the gym. Your bag has been packed and sitting in the hall since Sunday night. The plan, which is a good one, is Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday morning. Forty-five minutes each time, a bit of everything.

The four o'clock meeting runs until ten past five. There's a problem on the trains. You get home at twenty to seven, and dinner has to be on the table by half past because someone has to be somewhere at eight. You stand in the hall and do the sum. The gym is ten minutes each way. Then there's changing and a shower after. That leaves perhaps fifteen minutes of actual exercise, twenty if you skip the shower and eat in your kit.

Fifteen minutes. You wouldn't even be warm. It would hardly be worth getting changed for. You step over the bag and go and start the dinner. You'll go on Thursday, and you'll do a full hour to make up.

On Thursday it's pouring and you've a headache. On Saturday morning you sleep in, because it's been a long week, and by the time you're up there are errands. On Sunday night the bag is still in the hall, and you look at it with a familiar mixture of guilt and resolve. Next week, properly.

I'd like you to notice something about that Tuesday. You had twenty-five minutes. They were real and free minutes, in which you could have moved your body. You could have walked fast

round the block a few times, or gone up and down the stairs, or done something on the living-room floor. At twenty to seven you didn't weigh up twenty-five minutes of something against nothing. As you saw it, the choice was between a proper session and a failed one. A failed session felt worse than none, and none is what you chose.

So the week's total was nought minutes. That wasn't for lack of time. The week had several slots of fifteen or twenty minutes in it. None of them was big enough to hold the thing you'd decided exercise had to be.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **The full session** is your picture of proper exercise, whatever it is for you. **The threshold** is the line below which exercise, in your mind, doesn't count. For most people with this habit it sits somewhere around thirty minutes. **A zero** is a day when you'd meant to exercise and did none. **The floor** is a term I'll bring in later, for the smallest amount you'll accept on a bad day.

The habit has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

The decision is made quickly, by a sum. You count the available minutes, set them against the threshold, find them short, and that's that.

The alternative is never a shorter session. It's always nothing. People who'd scoff at fifteen minutes of walking as pointless will spend the same fifteen minutes on their phone without a thought.

It comes with a promise to make up for it, usually with an even longer session later. The promise raises the bar for the next attempt.

And it defers to a future week that's expected to be less busy. That week hasn't arrived yet.

Before chapter 2, if you're willing, look back over the last four weeks. Write down how many full sessions you'd planned, and how many you did. Then, for each one you missed, ask whether you had ten free minutes at some point that day. The point isn't guilt. You're finding out whether you were short of time or only short of time for the full session.

## Why "properly" feels right

If you believe that twenty minutes isn't worth bothering with, you didn't invent that. You were told it, and by good authorities. This chapter takes the belief seriously, because I think most people with this habit are trying to do the right thing by the best information they were given.

I can find five reasons behind the threshold.

The first is the old advice. For a couple of decades, public health guidelines said adults should get thirty minutes of moderate exercise on most days. They added that it could be built up in bouts, but that each bout had to last at least ten minutes to count. What most people took from this was simpler. Thirty minutes is the unit, and below some minimum it doesn't register. If you absorbed that, you were paying attention.

The second is the idea that the body needs time to get going. You've heard that you don't start burning fat until twenty minutes in, or that the first ten minutes are only a warm-up. On that view a fifteen-minute session stops before the useful part begins.

The third is sweat and effort. Real exercise leaves you red in the face and needing a shower. If you're not gasping you're not improving. A brisk walk in your work shoes doesn't feel like anything, so it can't be doing anything.

The fourth is the overhead. A gym session has fixed costs, which are travelling, changing, showering and changing back. If those take forty minutes, it makes no sense to pay them for fifteen

minutes of exercise. That reasoning is sound as far as it goes.

The fifth is about standards, and it's the one I respect most. You're someone who does things properly. When you take something on, you don't do a half-hearted version and call it done. A ten-minute token effort feels like the sort of thing people do so they can tell themselves they've exercised. You'd rather be honest, and do it right or admit you didn't do it.

Underneath all five is a reasonable wish. You want the effort to be worth something. Nobody wants to go through the motions for no result. If it were true that short sessions did nothing, then skipping them would be the rational choice, and I'd have no book to write.

So the next several chapters take the question head on. Does a short amount of movement do anything? They look at what it does for how long you live, and for how you feel that evening. They look at whether it needs to be continuous, and whether it needs to hurt. On most of these questions the evidence is better than it is for most things in this series. Large numbers of people have been followed for many years, and in the recent studies their movement was measured by devices and didn't depend on memory. I'll say where the evidence has limits. The general direction isn't in much doubt.

## "It wouldn't do anything"

The central belief is that an amount of exercise below the threshold is physiologically pointless. The research answers this one fairly directly.

Hannah Arem and colleagues pooled six large studies from the United States and Europe, covering 661,137 adults followed for a median of about fourteen years. They sorted people by how much leisure-time physical activity they reported, measured against the recommended minimum of 150 minutes a week at moderate intensity. Then they compared death rates. People who did the recommended amount, or up to twice as much, had a 31 per cent lower risk of dying during the study than people who did nothing. That's the group the guidelines are aimed at.

The group that matters for this book is the one below it. These people did some activity but less than the recommended minimum. They're the ones who, by the logic of the threshold, were wasting their time. Their risk of dying was 20 per cent lower than that of the people who did nothing.

Put those two numbers side by side. Going from nothing to something, but not enough, was associated with a 20 per cent reduction. Going from there all the way up to meeting the guidelines added another 11 points. Doing three to five times the guidelines got people to 39 per cent. So the first step, from zero to a little, was the largest single step on the whole scale. The rest of the gain was spread out over the distance between a little and a great deal.

A study from Taiwan makes the same point with a specific amount. Chi Pang Wen and colleagues followed 416,175 people for an average of eight years. The lowest active group exercised for about fifteen minutes a day on average, roughly 92 minutes a week. Compared with the inactive group, they had a 14 per cent lower risk of death and a life expectancy about three years longer. Each further fifteen minutes a day reduced the risk by another 4 per cent.

Both of those studies relied on people reporting their own exercise, which is known to be unreliable. More recent work has used devices worn on the body. Ulf Ekelund and colleagues combined eight studies in which 36,383 people wore accelerometers, and followed them for about six years. They split people into four equal groups by total activity. Compared with the least active quarter, the next quarter up had about half the risk of death. The third and fourth quarters did better still, but by much smaller steps. Any physical activity, at any intensity, was associated with lower risk.

I need to be honest about what these studies can't show. They're observational. Nobody assigned people to exercise or not. They observed what people did and what happened to them. People who are already ill tend to move less, and that inflates the apparent benefit of moving. People who exercise also tend to eat better, smoke less and have more money. The researchers adjust for these things as well as they can, and some studies exclude deaths in the first few years to reduce the illness problem. But no adjustment is perfect, and the true causal effect is probably smaller than the raw figures. What I'd rely on is the shape of the curve, which keeps

turning up in study after study, in different countries and with different methods. It rises steeply at the bottom and flattens towards the top.

That shape settles most of this chapter's question. The threshold belief pictures exercise as a switch. Below the line nothing happens, and above it you get the benefit. In the data it looks more like a dimmer, and most of the brightening comes in the first part of the turn.

On that Tuesday you thought you were choosing between a session that counted and a gesture that didn't. What you were offered was the most valuable fifteen minutes on the scale, and you turned it down because it wasn't forty-five.

## **"It has to be in one go"**

The old guidelines had a second rule inside them, which was that activity only counted in bouts of ten minutes or more. It's worth knowing where that came from and what became of it, because a lot of people are still living by it.

As far as I can tell, the rule was a product of how the early evidence was gathered and not a finding about the body. The early trials tested sessions of ten minutes and up, so that's what the guidelines could vouch for. Nobody had shown that shorter bouts didn't work. They hadn't been studied.

When the United States updated its guidelines in 2018, the advisory committee reviewed the question formally. John Jakicic and colleagues looked at 29 studies. Their conclusion was that physical activity of any bout duration is associated with improved health outcomes, including lower mortality. They pointed out that the randomised trials had only ever tested bouts of ten minutes or more, which is why the old rule existed. They said the evidence might call for a shift in public health advice, towards counting total activity regardless of how it's broken up.

One study in that review is worth describing. Pedro Saint-Maurice and colleagues took 4,840 American adults aged forty and over who had worn activity monitors for a week, and followed them for about six and a half years. They counted each person's moderate-to-vigorous activity in three ways. One way counted every minute of it, another counted only bouts of five minutes or more, and the third counted only bouts of ten minutes or more. If the bout rule

were right, the bout minutes should have predicted survival better than the scattered ones. They didn't. The associations with mortality were similar however the minutes were counted. People who got their activity in scraps did as well as people who got the same amount in blocks.

As I understand it, the bout requirement has since been dropped from American guidance, and the World Health Organization's 2020 guidelines left it out as well. The WHO authors sum up their message as "some physical activity is better than none". The NHS guidance for adults opens by saying adults should do some type of physical activity every day, and it adds that exercise just once or twice a week can reduce the risk of heart disease or stroke. It also advises breaking up long periods of not moving with some activity.

The research has since gone to even shorter durations. Emmanuel Stamatakis and colleagues used the UK Biobank, where tens of thousands of people wore wrist monitors for a week. They picked out 25,241 people who said they did no exercise or sport at all, and looked for brief bursts of vigorous activity in their ordinary days. A burst could be running for a bus, climbing stairs fast or carrying heavy shopping up a hill, and each lasted a minute or two. Over about seven years, the people who managed three such bursts a day had a risk of death 38 to 40 per cent lower than those with none. The typical total was about four and a half minutes a day.

That is an observational study, with all the cautions from the last chapter, and the size of the effect should be read with some scepticism. People who can run for a bus are healthier to begin with than people who can't. But there's a small randomised experiment that points the same way. Madison Jenkins and

colleagues took sedentary young adults and had half of them climb three flights of stairs briskly, three times a day, on three days a week. Each climb took well under a minute. After six weeks the stair climbers' aerobic fitness had improved compared with a control group that did nothing. The improvement was modest, and there were only twelve people in each group. But the whole of the exercise was climbing sixty steps, three times a day, and it still made a difference that could be measured.

So the body doesn't seem to need a continuous block. It responds to the total, and it responds to scraps. The twenty-five minutes you had on Tuesday would have counted. So would three separate eight-minute walks, if that's how the day had offered them to you.

## **"I wouldn't feel any better for it"**

Set aside how long you live. Most people exercise, when they do, because of how it makes them feel that day. It clears the head and takes the edge off a bad afternoon, and they sleep better. A common thought at twenty to seven is that a short session wouldn't deliver any of that. You need the full forty-five minutes to get the lift.

Three researchers, Hansen, Stevens and Coast, tested this. They had people come in on four occasions. On one occasion they rested quietly. On the others they rode an exercise bike at a moderate intensity for ten minutes, twenty minutes or thirty minutes. Before and after each, they filled in a standard mood questionnaire. Exercise improved vigour and reduced fatigue and overall negative mood. Those improvements were present after ten minutes. One measure, mental confusion, went on improving up to twenty minutes. Beyond twenty minutes there was no further improvement in mood at all. The thirty-minute session didn't leave people feeling any better than the twenty-minute one, and on most measures no better than the ten.

It's one study, done on an exercise bike in a laboratory, and I wouldn't build a cathedral on it. But it agrees with common experience once you look for it. Think of the last time you walked briskly to the station because you were late. You arrived warm and awake and in a slightly better mood. That took eight minutes and you weren't even trying to exercise.

There's a second finding that bears on the moment of decision. Matthew Ruby, Elizabeth Dunn and colleagues ran four studies with 279 adults. Some people predicted how much they'd enjoy an exercise session they were about to do. Others reported how much they'd enjoyed it once it was over. People consistently underestimated how much they would enjoy it. This held for group classes and solo sessions, for moderate and hard sessions, and for yoga, Pilates, aerobics and weights.

The researchers also worked out why. When people imagine a session, they give too much weight to the beginning of it, and the beginning is the worst part. You feel stiff and cold and reluctant, and for the first few minutes everything feels like an effort. Then the body warms up and it gets better, and the end is often pleasant. But the forecast is dominated by those first few minutes. The researchers call this forecasting myopia. When they got people to think about the middle of the session instead of the start, predicted enjoyment went up, and so did people's intention to exercise.

Apply this to the hall on Tuesday. You're tired, you've had a bad journey and dinner needs making. You ask yourself whether fifteen minutes of exercise would be worth it, and your mind supplies a picture. It's you, cold and stiff, starting. It doesn't show you at minute nine, warmed up and breathing well, with the meeting finally out of your head. So the answer comes back no. It came from a forecast, and this kind of forecast is known to be too gloomy.

The objection is fair. "Sometimes I'm exhausted and I wouldn't enjoy it." That's true sometimes. But the person in the hall at twenty to seven isn't well placed to judge. The most reliable way to

find out is to begin, and to give yourself leave to stop after ten minutes if it's as bad as you feared. Most of the time it won't be, and you'll feel better for it that evening.

## **"By the time I've got changed"**

Of the five reasons in chapter 2, the fourth was the overhead. A gym session has fixed costs. If travel, changing and showering take forty minutes between them, then fifteen minutes of exercise is a poor return on fifty-five minutes of your evening. I said that reasoning was sound as far as it went, and it is. It goes wrong in assuming that exercise means the gym.

The overhead belongs to the full session and not to exercise as such. Take it away and see what's left.

A brisk walk needs no kit. You can do it in work clothes and ordinary shoes. You go out of the front door, walk fast for five minutes, turn round and walk back. There's no travel, because you start where you are. Unless it's a hot day you won't need a shower, because a moderate pace doesn't soak you. The NHS gives a simple test for moderate intensity, which is that you can still talk but you couldn't sing. It should raise your heart rate, make you breathe faster and make you feel warmer. A properly brisk walk does that for most people.

Stairs need no kit either. If you live or work somewhere with a staircase, several trips up and down at a good pace will have you breathing hard in under five minutes. The Jenkins experiment in chapter 4 was nothing more than this.

Ten minutes of movements on the living-room floor needs a space the size of a rug. Squats, press-ups against the kitchen counter, stepping up on to the bottom stair, marching on the spot with high

knees. You'd want to be out of your work trousers for that, perhaps. It's still two minutes of overhead and not forty.

Once the overhead is gone, a second fact comes into view, and I think it's the most practical point in the book. You have few ninety-minute blocks in a week. Most working adults with any family responsibilities could count them on one hand, and those blocks are fought over by everything else you want to do. But you have a great many ten-minute slots. There's one while the dinner's in the oven, and one after you've dropped someone off and before you need to be anywhere. The second half of a lunch break is another. So is the gap between the end of work and the start of the evening, the very gap you stood in on Tuesday and called useless.

If exercise can only happen in ninety-minute blocks, it has to compete for the scarcest thing in your week, and it will often lose. If it can happen in ten-minute slots, it's drawing on something you've got plenty of. This is my own reasoning and I know of no study that counts people's free slots. But I'd invite you to count your own tomorrow. Note each time you find yourself with ten minutes that aren't committed to anything, including the ones you spend on your phone. I'd be surprised if you found fewer than four.

An objection. "I don't want to be the person power-walking round the block in office shoes. I'd feel ridiculous." I understand that. Two things may help. The first is that nobody can tell a person walking briskly for exercise from a person who's late for something. The second is that the feeling of ridiculousness is the threshold talking again. It's saying that this isn't real exercise and you'd look like someone pretending. Chapters 3 and 4 were about whether it's real, and by the evidence it is.

A second objection. "I've paid for the gym. I should use it." If you like the gym, use it, on the days when the block is there. This book never asks you to give it up. But the thirty-four pounds is spent whether you go or not, and it shouldn't be allowed to define what counts. On a day when the gym can't happen, it's no use to you, and the walk round the block is worth the most valuable fifteen minutes on the scale.

## **"A short one is cheating"**

This is the fifth reason, the one about standards, and I said I respected it most. You don't like token efforts. You'd rather do nothing and be honest about it than do ten minutes and pretend you've trained. A short session feels like a way of letting yourself off.

I'd like to take the standard at its word and see what it produces.

Suppose two people have the same busy life. The first holds to the full session. The plan is three sessions of forty-five minutes a week. In a good week all three happen. But most weeks aren't good. Let's say, and I'm being generous, that over a typical month the plan delivers one session a week on average. That's forty-five minutes a week. In a bad month, which for many people with this habit is most months, it delivers one session a fortnight or fewer. Call it twenty minutes a week, and for some stretches nothing at all.

The second person has no plan worth the name. They do ten minutes of brisk walking most days, say six days out of seven, because ten minutes nearly always fits. That's sixty minutes a week, every week, in good months and bad.

These figures are arithmetic on an example, and they aren't statistics about anyone. You can put in your own numbers from the exercise at the end of chapter 1. But for many readers the sum comes out the same way. The person with the high standard is

doing less exercise than the person with the low one, often much less. Far from protecting the quality of their exercise, the standard is preventing most of it from happening.

Now go back to the curve in chapter 3. It's steepest at the bottom. The difference between nought and sixty minutes a week is where most of the benefit lies. The person doing ten minutes a day is standing on the good part of the curve all year round. The person waiting for full sessions spends long stretches at the bottom.

So which of them is cheating? I'd say it's closer to the truth that the high standard works as a respectable excuse, though I don't mean that as an accusation. Nobody chooses it for that reason. It feels like rigour. But judge a rule by what it produces, and a rule that says "do it properly or not at all" reliably produces not at all. It's like refusing to put five pounds into savings because you can't spare five hundred. Whatever you think of the principle, the account stays empty.

There's an identity question under this, and I'd like to answer it plainly. You might feel that people who exercise are a certain type. They have the kit and the routine and the hour carved out. If you do ten minutes in your work shoes you're not one of them. You're someone who walked round the block.

I'd turn that round. What makes someone "a person who exercises" is that they move their body on most days, year after year. The kit, the hour and the gym don't decide it. By that measure the ten-minutes-a-day person qualifies and the three-planned-sessions

person mostly doesn't, however good their trainers are. If being that kind of person matters to you, regular short sessions will get you there sooner than full sessions that keep getting cancelled.

None of this means lowering your standards for the full session when you do one. It means having a second standard for the other days, and the second standard is that something beats nothing.

## How one missed Tuesday becomes a missed month

So far I've treated each skipped day as a separate event. But you'll have noticed that they cluster. One missed Tuesday tends to take Thursday and Saturday with it, and sometimes the following week as well. This chapter is about why, because I think the way zeros spread does more damage than any single zero.

Here's the sequence as I understand it. This is my interpretation, though part of it has research behind it.

You had a plan for the week, which was Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. On Tuesday it fails. In your mind, the week is now damaged. You can no longer have a perfect week. The best offer is two out of three, which is a flawed week. And a strange thing happens to motivation once a week is flawed. Thursday's session, which on Monday was part of a plan you were proud of, is now part of a salvage job. It's easier to let it go. "This week's a write-off. I'll start fresh on Monday." A fresh start is attractive because it's clean. It gives you back the chance of a perfect week, and all it costs is the rest of this one.

Researchers who study dieting have described something close to this. A person on a strict diet who breaks it with one biscuit often goes on to eat far more than someone who wasn't dieting at all. The reasoning seems to be that the day is ruined anyway, so it may as well be ruined thoroughly. I haven't found the same experiment done with exercise, so I'm drawing a parallel and not reporting a

finding. But the structure is the same. There's a rule with no middle ground, then a small breach, and the breach gets treated as total.

The belief underneath is that consistency means an unbroken record, and a broken record has to be started again. There's good evidence that this is false for habits in general. Phillippa Lally and colleagues followed 96 volunteers who each chose a new daily behaviour. It might be eating a piece of fruit with lunch, or going for a run before dinner. They tracked how automatic it felt, every day for twelve weeks. The time it took to become habitual varied enormously, from 18 days to 254. The finding that matters for us is that missing one opportunity to do the behaviour did not materially affect the process. A missed day didn't set people back to the start. The habit kept forming as if nothing had happened, provided they carried on afterwards.

So the damage from a missed Tuesday is whatever you lost on Tuesday, and no more. The week isn't ruined and neither is the habit. No streak existed anywhere except in your head. The rest of the damage comes afterwards, from deciding that a flawed week isn't worth continuing.

This is where the ten-minute version does something beyond its own ten minutes. If on Tuesday at twenty to seven you'd walked briskly round the block for ten minutes, Tuesday wouldn't have been a zero. It would have been a short day. The week wouldn't be damaged, because nothing had been missed. Thursday would arrive as part of an intact week, and you'd be more likely to go. The ten minutes protects the sessions around it, and I suspect that's a good part of its value.

In practice, that means you don't restart on Monday. If you've had a zero, or a week of them, the next session is today and it's ten minutes. You haven't got a streak to rebuild and you haven't got a debt to pay off with a double session. The promise to make up for it, which chapter 1 listed as a feature of the habit, only raises the bar and makes the next zero more likely. Drop it, and do ten minutes today.

## **It doesn't have to hurt**

Behind the threshold there's often a second belief, about effort. It says that exercise only works if it's hard, and that you should finish red-faced, gasping and wrung out. By that standard ten minutes at a pace where you can still hold a conversation is a stroll. Meanwhile the full session is something you half dread, which is another reason it gets cancelled so easily.

Panteleimon Ekkekakis, Gaynor Parfitt and Steven Petruzzello reviewed 33 studies on how people feel during exercise at different intensities. The picture is consistent. There's a level of effort that physiologists call the ventilatory threshold. It's roughly the point where breathing becomes laboured and talking gets difficult. Below that level, most people feel better during exercise than they did before they started. Around it, people vary a lot. Above it, nearly everyone feels worse, and the harder they push the worse they feel. The reviewers also note that when people choose their own intensity, as opposed to having it set for them, they tolerate harder efforts better.

They draw a conclusion that I think is important and that the fitness world has been slow to take up. Most advice about exercise treats the decision to do it as a matter of weighing pros and cons. But people are also steered by how exercise felt last time. If it was unpleasant, some part of you will resist doing it again, whatever your reasoning says. The reviewers argue that guidelines should consider whether a given intensity is likely to increase or decrease pleasure, alongside whether it's effective and safe.

Think about what this means for someone with the threshold habit. Your picture of proper exercise is hard and long. So your memories of exercise are of something that mostly felt bad while it was happening. At twenty to seven on a Tuesday, the part of you that remembers that isn't keen. The harder you've made your full sessions, the easier they are to cancel. I'm interpreting here, but it follows from the review.

Ten minutes at a moderate pace sits well below the ventilatory threshold for most people. By the evidence of that review, it's likely to feel good while you're doing it, quite apart from how you feel afterwards. And you'll want to do again what felt good last time.

This connects to a study of how exercise habits form. Navin Kaushal and Ryan Rhodes followed 111 new gym members for twelve weeks. Several things predicted whether exercise became habitual. Consistency was one. Another was low complexity, meaning a simple routine. The setting mattered, and so did what the researchers call affective judgments, which means whether people found it enjoyable. They concluded that trainers should keep things fun and simple for new clients and focus on consistency. In their data, exercising at least four times a week for about six weeks was the minimum for a habit to take hold.

Ten minutes fits that description closely. It can be done often, it's simple and it's pleasant. It matches what that study says builds a habit far better than an ambitious programme does.

I should deal with the objection that easy exercise is pointless. It isn't, and chapter 3 showed that. In Ekelund's accelerometer studies, activity of any intensity was associated with lower

mortality, light activity included. Harder exercise does give more benefit per minute, and the NHS notes that 75 minutes of vigorous activity gives similar benefits to 150 of moderate. If you enjoy working hard, work hard. But hard isn't a requirement for it to count. If hard is what's been putting you off, you can drop that requirement and lose very little.

One practical note. Go by the NHS test. If you can talk but couldn't sing, you're at moderate intensity and you're doing it right. If you can't get a sentence out, you're above it, which is fine if you like it and unnecessary if you don't.

## **"But I want to get fit"**

I've been making the case for ten minutes for several chapters. There's a fair objection to all of it, and I owe you a direct answer.

"I'm not exercising only to lower my risk of dying in thirty years. I want to be fit. I want to run ten kilometres, or get stronger, or look different, or keep up with my kids. Ten minutes of walking isn't going to do that. If I settle for ten minutes I'm giving up on what I want."

Part of this is right. Ten minutes of brisk walking a day will not prepare you for a ten-kilometre race. It won't build much muscle. Fitness goals of that kind need training, which means sessions that are long enough and hard enough to push the body to adapt, done regularly for months. Arem's pooled study in chapter 3 found that benefits kept rising up to three to five times the recommended minimum. More is better, up to a high level. I'm not going to pretend that ten minutes is all anyone needs.

What I'd question is the idea that accepting ten minutes means settling for ten minutes. It helps to separate two things that exercise does.

The first is health. That means lower risk of heart disease and early death, better mood and better sleep. The research says most of that comes from modest amounts, and the first few minutes are the most valuable.

The second is performance. That means running further, lifting more and changing shape. It needs proper training, and the full session is the right tool for it.

The threshold habit gives you neither. By insisting on performance-grade sessions every time, and cancelling when they can't happen, you lose the health benefits on all the cancelled days. You also don't get the performance benefits, because one session a fortnight doesn't train anybody. You've kept the ambitious goal and given up the means of getting there.

So I'd treat ten minutes as the floor. The floor is the least you'll do on a day when you'd meant to exercise. There's no ceiling. On days when you have the block of time, do the full session. Train for the ten kilometres if that's what you want. Ten minutes is what happens on the other days, and its job is to make sure that no planned day is a zero.

I'd go further and say the floor helps the ambitious goal. Training depends on consistency over months. Most people don't fail at fitness goals because their sessions were too short. They fail because the sessions stopped. They missed a week, then restarted, then missed a fortnight, as chapter 8 described. A floor keeps the routine alive through the bad weeks, so that when a good week comes you're continuing and not starting again.

There's one more thing, and I have to be careful how I put it. Ten minutes often turns into more. Chapter 5 described how the beginning is the worst part. Once you're warm and moving, carrying on is easy, and you'll quite often find that the ten-minute walk has become twenty-five. That's a real and useful effect. But it

only works if the deal is honest. If "ten minutes" is a trick you're playing on yourself, and you really expect thirty every time, then part of you will know that. The resistance at twenty to seven will be to thirty minutes, not ten. So the agreement has to be real. Ten minutes is enough, and you're allowed to stop. If you feel like going on, go on. If you don't, you've done what you set out to do, and the day isn't a zero.

## Where the ten minutes goes

A rule that says "do ten minutes" is easy to agree with and easy to forget. Short sessions have a weakness that long ones don't.

Because they're small, they have no place in the diary, and things with no place in the diary tend not to happen. This chapter is about giving the ten minutes somewhere to live.

Lally's habit study from chapter 8 has a detail worth bringing out. The volunteers didn't only choose a behaviour. They chose a behaviour to do in the same context every day, such as after breakfast. Repeating the behaviour in a consistent context was what made it more automatic over time. The point of a cue is that you don't have to remember or decide. One thing finishes, and the next thing starts.

So choose an anchor, something that already happens every day at a roughly fixed time, and attach the ten minutes to it. Here are some that work for a lot of people, offered as examples.

You could go straight out after the first cup of tea in the morning, before the day has a chance to get at you.

You could take the second half of your lunch break. Eat first, then walk for ten minutes and come back. It also tends to improve the afternoon.

You could use the moment you get home. That's the Tuesday slot. Before you take your coat off, go back out of the door for ten minutes. Once the coat's off, you're in for the evening.

You could use the time while the dinner's in the oven. Ten minutes of stairs or floor movements fit inside most cooking times.

There's also the school run or the station. Park ten minutes' walk away, or get off a stop early, and the ten minutes is built into a journey you were making anyway.

That last one is part of a larger point, which is that a good deal of movement needn't be set aside as exercise at all. I-Min Lee and colleagues studied 16,741 American women with an average age of 72, who wore a step counter for a week and were then followed for about four years. The women were divided into four groups by daily steps. The least active group averaged about 2,700 steps a day. The next group up averaged about 4,400, and their risk of death during the study was 41 per cent lower. Risk went on falling with more steps until about 7,500 a day, where it levelled off. The authors remark that the popular target of 10,000 steps has limited scientific basis. When they looked at walking speed, it mattered much less than the total once steps were accounted for.

The usual cautions about observational studies apply, and these were older women, so the numbers may differ for you. But look at how small the difference is between the bottom two groups. It's about 1,700 steps, which for most people is fifteen minutes or so of walking spread over a day. That's a walk to the post box, the far end of the car park and the stairs at work. It's another steep-at-the-bottom curve, and another 10,000-style threshold that turned out not to be where the benefit starts.

A few practical things make the ten minutes more likely to happen. These are my own suggestions.

Keep a pair of shoes you can walk briskly in wherever your anchor is, by the front door or under your desk. It removes the last bit of overhead.

Have a default route that takes five minutes out and five minutes back. Work it out once so that you never have to think about where to go.

Have a wet-weather default as well. It might be the stairs, the living-room floor or a multi-storey car park. If you've only planned for dry days, you'll skip the wet ones.

Decide on three options in advance, and no more. For example, the walk, the stairs and the floor routine. At twenty to seven on a bad Tuesday you don't want to be designing a session. You want to pick from a short menu.

And keep the gym bag packed, if you use a gym. The full session is still there for the days that can hold it.

## **"Strength needs a gym"**

So far I've mostly talked about the kind of exercise that gets you breathing, such as walking, stairs and cycling. The guidelines have a second part that people with the threshold habit are even more likely to skip. The NHS says adults should do strengthening activities that work all the major muscle groups on at least two days a week. The WHO guidelines recommend regular muscle strengthening for all age groups.

Here the threshold belief takes a slightly different form. Strength training, in most people's heads, means a gym with racks of weights and machines. It means a programme, written down, with sets and repetitions. It means an hour. Without all of that it's not really strength training, so without a gym membership and a free hour it doesn't happen at all.

I can't offer you the same depth of evidence here as in chapters 3 and 4, and I'd rather say so than pretend. I haven't checked studies on very short strength sessions for this book. What I can offer is what the NHS guidance says, which sets the bar a good deal lower than the gym picture suggests.

The NHS lists the following among activities that strengthen muscles. It includes carrying heavy shopping bags, heavy gardening such as digging and shovelling, and lifting and carrying children. It includes exercises that use your own body weight, such as push-ups and sit-ups, and working with resistance bands. It says these can be done at home or in a gym. For how hard, it gives one

rule. To get health benefits from strength exercises, you should do them to the point where you need a short rest before repeating the activity.

You'll see that there's no mention of how many minutes, or of equipment. What matters is that the muscles work hard enough to need a rest. You can get there in a small space and a short time.

Here's what a ten-minute version might look like, as an example and not a prescription. Stand up from a chair and sit down again, slowly, without using your hands, until your legs want a rest. Do press-ups against the kitchen counter, or against the wall if the counter's too hard, until your arms want a rest. Step up on to the bottom stair and down again, leading with one leg and then the other. Carry something heavy in each hand up and down the hall, such as two full shopping bags or two large bottles of water. Rest between each, and go round twice. That works your legs, arms, chest, back and grip, and it's done in the time the potatoes take to boil.

If you have any doubts about your joints, your back or your blood pressure, check with your GP or a physiotherapist before you start, as the preface said. If something hurts in a sharp or worrying way, as opposed to the ordinary effort of a working muscle, stop.

Strength is also the area where a small regular amount is most clearly better than an ambitious plan you've abandoned. Muscles respond to being asked to work, and they decline when they aren't asked. Someone who does ten minutes at home twice a week is asking their muscles twice a week. Someone who's waiting until they can get to the gym properly isn't asking at all.

## The decision

Up to now I've asked you to notice things and count things. This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes this late on purpose. If I'd opened with "just do ten minutes", you'd have heard it as one more piece of cheerful advice and answered, correctly, that ten minutes doesn't count. You now have reason to think it does.

The decision is this. **On any day I meant to exercise and can't do the full session, I do ten minutes, and it counts.**

It has five parts.

**Keep the plan.** If you have a plan for full sessions, keep it. The gym on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday is still the intention. Nothing here asks you to aim lower on the days that go well.

**Set the floor.** Ten minutes is the floor. On a planned day, when the block of time has gone, the choice is no longer between the full session and nothing. It's between the full session and ten minutes. You've taken nothing off the list of options for the day. If you'd like to go further and do ten minutes on the unplanned days too, so much the better, and chapter 11's anchors will help. But the rule only requires it on days you'd already meant to exercise.

**Choose your three.** Decide today what your ten-minute options are. Pick one for outdoors, one for indoors and one that includes some strength, and write them down. At the moment of decision you should be choosing from that list, without having to invent anything.

**Count minutes, not sessions.** At the end of each week, add up the total minutes you moved, in any form. Stop scoring yourself on whether you did the three sessions. A week of one gym visit and four ten-minute walks is eighty-five minutes. Under the old scoring that was a failed week, one out of three. Under the new scoring it's eighty-five minutes, which sits on a good part of the curve in chapter 3. The way you score yourself changes how the week feels, and chapter 8 showed how much that matters.

**No making up.** A missed day isn't a debt. You don't owe a double session on Thursday. The next session is whatever it was going to be.

Plans in the form "when this happens, then I'll do that" are well supported by research. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled 94 tests and found that such plans made people a good deal more likely to follow through. Here are three, and you can change the wording to suit yourself.

When I see that the full session can't happen today, then I'll pick one of my three and start within five minutes.

When I hear myself think "it's not worth it for ten minutes", then I'll take that as the cue to put my shoes on.

When I've had a zero, or a week of them, then the next session is today and it's ten minutes.

The second plan matters most. "It's not worth it" is the threshold talking, and it's the thought that has cancelled more of your exercise than any meeting or train. You can't stop it arriving. You

can decide in advance what it means. From now on it means you should put your shoes on.

Here's what to expect, and I'll be careful because I can't promise you an outcome. The first few ten-minute sessions will feel slightly silly. You'll be back in the house almost before you've left it, with a voice in your head saying that didn't count. It did count, as chapters 3 and 4 showed. Within a couple of weeks I'd expect your weekly minutes to be higher than they've been for a long time, even if you haven't done a single extra full session. I'd expect you to find that ten minutes becomes fifteen or twenty fairly often, without effort. I'd also expect the full sessions to become a bit more frequent, because you're no longer restarting from cold every time. I can't promise any particular change in your fitness, weight or health. That depends on far more than this book covers. What I'm fairly confident of is that you'll have fewer zeros.

## Colds, bad knees and weeks that fall apart

The rule is simple. Some situations complicate it, and I should be plain about them.

**When you're ill.** The floor doesn't apply to days when you're unwell. If you've a fever, a chest infection or anything that's put you in bed, rest. I haven't checked medical guidance on exercising through minor illness for this book, so I won't offer a rule about colds. Use your judgment, and ask a pharmacist or GP if you're unsure. When you're better, begin again with ten minutes. Don't try to make up what you missed.

**Injuries and sore joints.** If something hurts in a way that isn't the ordinary ache of effort, don't push through it for the sake of the rule. Often there's another option on your list that doesn't involve the sore part. A bad knee may still allow the counter press-ups, and a sore shoulder won't stop you walking. If a pain persists, see a GP or a physiotherapist. And if you've a long-term condition, the guidance in the preface applies. Get advice on what's suitable, and then apply the rule to that.

**Warning signs.** I'll repeat the caution from the preface. Chest pain, pain spreading to the arm, jaw, neck or back, or chest discomfort with sweating, sickness, light-headedness or breathlessness, means stop and call 999. Don't finish the ten minutes first.

**The week that falls apart.** Some weeks there's a crisis at work, a sick child or a funeral, and nothing happens at all. That's life and it isn't a failure. The important thing is what you do when the week

ends. The old habit says to wait for a clean Monday and a clear diary. Chapter 8 explained why that's a mistake. The day you notice you've had a run of zeros is the day to do ten minutes. If it's a Thursday evening in your work clothes, do it then. You're not rebuilding a streak, because there never was one. You're doing today's ten minutes and nothing more.

**Holidays and travel.** Your anchors disappear when your routine does. Choose one for the trip. "Before breakfast, ten minutes' walk from the hotel door and back" works almost anywhere. Walking round a new place is one of the better ways to see it in any case.

**When the old voice wins.** There will be evenings when "it's not worth it" arrives and you agree with it and sit down. One evening means nothing. Chapter 8's finding applies to the new habit as well as the old plan, and a single missed opportunity doesn't undo it. Notice what happened. Were you hungry, was it raining and you had no wet-weather option, or had you left it too late in the evening? Adjust the plan, and do ten minutes tomorrow.

**When the floor starts to feel like a ceiling.** Some readers will find after a few months that ten minutes has become all they ever do, and they're content. That's a perfectly good outcome for health, and I wouldn't argue you out of it. Others will find they want more. If so, the usual route is to lengthen one or two sessions a week and leave the rest at ten. The NHS points beginners who'd like to run towards its Couch to 5K plan, which builds up over nine weeks. Keep the floor whatever you add. A more ambitious plan only means there's more that can be missed, and the ten-minute floor covers you when it is.

**When the problem is something else.** If you can't face any exercise at all, and that comes with weeks of low mood, poor sleep and loss of interest in things, the obstacle may be depression and not the threshold. Please see a GP. And as the preface said, if your trouble is feeling driven to exercise too much, this book's advice isn't meant for you, and a GP or the charity Beat is the place to go.

## Tuesday again

Here's the scene from chapter 1 again. It's an example of how it might go, and I'm not promising it.

It's Tuesday, and the plan was the gym at six. The four o'clock meeting runs over and there's a problem on the trains. You get home at twenty to seven, and dinner has to be on the table by half past.

You stand in the hall and the sum runs by itself, as it always has. The gym is ten minutes each way, then there's changing and a shower. That leaves fifteen minutes. It isn't worth it.

You hear that last sentence, and you know what it means now. It means you should put your shoes on.

You don't take your coat off. You change your shoes for the pair by the door, put the oven on to warm, and go back out. You turn left, and walk five minutes out along the route you worked out a fortnight ago, fast enough that you could talk but wouldn't want to sing. For the first two minutes it's exactly as unappealing as you expected. You're tired, your legs are heavy and the day is still in your head. Somewhere around the post box that changes. By the turn you're warm. On the way back you notice you've stopped thinking about the meeting. You get in at eight minutes to seven, a little out of breath, and start the dinner.

It took twelve minutes. Under the old scoring that Tuesday was a failure, because there was no gym, no forty-five minutes and no shower. Under the new scoring it's twelve minutes on a day that

would otherwise have been nought. The week is intact. On Thursday, when the time is there, you go to the gym, and it doesn't feel like starting again, because you never stopped.

By Sunday night the week adds up to one full session and three short ones, seventy-nine minutes in all. It isn't the week you planned, but it's far better than the week you'd have had.

It won't always go like that. Some Tuesdays you'll sit down, and some weeks will fall apart. But you now have an answer to the sentence that used to cancel everything. Ten minutes was always worth it, and the evidence for that is about as good as this kind of evidence gets. What held you back was a threshold that had no research behind it.

If you do one thing after closing this book, choose your three ten-minute options and put a pair of shoes by the door. Then, the next time the full session falls through, go out and do the ten minutes. It counts.

## Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or physiotherapist who knows your situation. The NHS advises speaking to a GP before starting if you haven't exercised for some time or have medical conditions or concerns.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 6, 7, 10 and 15, and the rule in chapter 13. The NHS pages were read in September 2026. They're written for England or the UK. Nearly all the studies of activity and mortality are observational. They show that people who move more die later, and they can't prove that the movement is the cause. People who are already unwell move less, which inflates the apparent benefit.

**Before you start.** The advice is from the NHS pages "Physical activity guidelines for adults aged 19 to 64", "Chest pain" and "Overview, eating disorders".

**Chapter 3.** Arem and twelve colleagues, "Leisure time physical activity and mortality: a detailed pooled analysis of the dose-response relationship", JAMA Internal Medicine 175, 2015, pages 959 to 967. The hazard ratios were 0.80 for some activity below the recommended minimum, 0.69 at one to two times the minimum

and 0.61 at three to five times. Activity was self-reported. Wen and nine colleagues, "Minimum amount of physical activity for reduced mortality and extended life expectancy: a prospective cohort study", *Lancet* 378, 2011, pages 1244 to 1253. Activity was self-reported. Ekelund and nineteen colleagues, "Dose-response associations between accelerometry measured physical activity and sedentary time and all cause mortality: systematic review and harmonised meta-analysis", *BMJ* 366, 2019, 14570. The hazard ratios for total activity were 0.48, 0.34 and 0.27 for the second, third and fourth quarters against the least active quarter.

**Chapter 4.** Jakicic and eight colleagues, "Association between bout duration of physical activity and health: systematic review", *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise* 51, 2019, pages 1213 to 1219. Saint-Maurice, Troiano, Matthews and Kraus, "Moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and all-cause mortality: do bouts matter?", *Journal of the American Heart Association* 7, 2018, e007678. The journal later published a correction to this paper, which I haven't read. Bull and twenty-nine colleagues, "World Health Organization 2020 guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour", *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 54, 2020, pages 1451 to 1462. My account of where the ten-minute rule came from, and my statement that American and WHO guidance no longer include it, are from my general understanding and I haven't checked the guideline documents themselves. Stamatakis and six colleagues, "Association of wearable device-measured vigorous intermittent lifestyle physical activity with mortality", *Nature Medicine* 28, 2022, pages 2521 to 2529. There were 852 deaths among 25,241 people. Jenkins, Nairn, Skelly, Little and Gibala, "Do stair climbing exercise 'snacks' improve cardiorespiratory fitness?",

Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism 44, 2019, pages 681 to 684. The summary gives 60 steps per climb. That each climb took under a minute is my estimate.

**Chapter 5.** Hansen, Stevens and Coast, "Exercise duration and mood state: how much is enough to feel better?", Health Psychology 20, 2001, pages 267 to 275. The summary doesn't give the number of participants. Ruby, Dunn, Perrino, Gillis and Viel, "The invisible benefits of exercise", Health Psychology 30, 2011, pages 67 to 74.

**Chapter 8.** The dieting research is Herman and Mack, "Restrained and unrestrained eating", Journal of Personality 43, 1975, pages 647 to 660, and later work by Polivy and Herman. Applying it to exercise is my parallel. Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts and Wardle, "How are habits formed: modelling habit formation in the real world", European Journal of Social Psychology 40, 2010, pages 998 to 1009. The behaviours I mention are illustrations of the kind of thing participants chose. Of 96 volunteers, 82 gave enough data, and the model fitted well for 39.

**Chapter 9.** Ekkekakis, Parfitt and Petruzzello, "The pleasure and displeasure people feel when they exercise at different intensities", Sports Medicine 41, 2011, pages 641 to 671. Kaushal and Rhodes, "Exercise habit formation in new gym members: a longitudinal study", Journal of Behavioral Medicine 38, 2015, pages 652 to 663. That harder past sessions make future ones easier to cancel is my inference.

**Chapter 11.** Lee, Shiroma, Kamada, Bassett, Matthews and Buring, "Association of step volume and intensity with all-cause mortality in older women", JAMA Internal Medicine 179, 2019, pages 1105 to 1112. Median steps in the four groups were 2,718, 4,363, 5,905 and 8,442. The hazard ratio for the second group against the first was 0.59. My conversion of 1,700 steps to about fifteen minutes of walking is a rough estimate.

**Chapter 12.** All of the guidance is from the NHS page "Physical activity guidelines for adults aged 19 to 64". The example routine is mine and hasn't been tested. I didn't review research on short strength sessions.

**Chapter 13.** Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule and its five parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

**Chapter 14.** Couch to 5K is mentioned on the NHS guidelines page as a nine-week running plan for beginners.