

Walk there

A short book about driving or taking the lift for distances
your legs could cover

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First edition

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

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You need to get somewhere close, and your hand goes to the car keys or the lift button before you've thought about it. The shop half a mile away. The office on the second floor. The school six hundred yards up the road. Your legs could cover the distance, and they don't, and you don't experience that as a decision, because it isn't one. It's a default.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the default makes sense from the inside. The car is right there, the lift is right there, the weather is what it is, and you've got things to carry and not much time. The second is that most of the reasons don't survive a look. For short trips the car often loses on time once you count the keys, the parking and the walk from the space. Walking at an ordinary brisk pace is what the NHS calls moderate activity, the kind that counts, and the biggest health gain from walking is at the low end, between none and a little. And the time isn't lost. It's moved, and it comes back with something attached. The third is practical. You set a line, a mile and three floors to start, and below the line you walk, unless you've got a reason you'd say out loud. Chapters 19 to 21 cover how.

This book doesn't ask you to sell the car, take up hiking, buy a step counter or hit ten thousand steps. It asks you to use your legs for the distances they were already going to cover, and to notice how many of those there are.

Three cautions.

The NHS says that if you haven't been active for some time, or you have a medical condition, you should speak to a GP before starting. A mile of walking is gentle, and for most people it's nothing to check. But if you're not sure, ask.

If walking a mile or climbing two floors brings on chest pain, or breathlessness that's out of proportion, or dizziness, stop and see a GP. Chest pain that doesn't go away is 999.

And if a mile isn't a distance your body can cover, because of joints, a heart or lung condition, a disability, or age, the line in this book is yours to set, with your GP if you'd like, and the argument holds above whatever line you choose. Nothing here is about people who can't walk. It's about people who can and don't.

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

The car keys

You've run out of milk. The shop is half a mile away, which is about ten minutes on foot. You pick the keys up off the hook. You don't decide to. Your hand does it on the way past, and by the time you've thought about anything you're reversing off the drive. At the shop you pull in, and the space by the door is taken, so you go round once and take one three rows back, and walk from there.

At work your office is on the second floor. The lift lobby has four people in it looking at the numbers above the doors. You join them. The stairs are through a door to the left that nobody uses. You wait a minute and a half and ride two floors. On Thursday you pick your daughter up from school, which is six hundred yards from the house, and you drive, and you sit in the queue of cars outside the gate for longer than the walk would have taken, and she gets in, and you drive back.

If somebody asked, you'd say you're quite active. You're on your feet a lot. You don't feel like a person who sits around. But if you counted the distances your legs covered on a normal day, it would be the car park, the lift lobby, the corridors and the kitchen, and not much else. The legs are there. They're just the last thing you reach for.

This is an invented day, but I'd be surprised if you didn't recognise most of it. Some words, so we can talk about it plainly. I'll call the hand going to the keys or the lift button without a decision **the default**. It isn't laziness, and I'll say why in the next chapter. It's what happens when a car and a lift are always available and

nobody has drawn a line. **The line** is the distance and number of floors below which you'd walk, and right now you haven't got one. A mile and three floors is where I'll suggest you start. **Door to door** is the honest time comparison, from the moment you decide to go to the moment you arrive, and it includes the keys, the car park and the lift lobby. **The errand walk** is walking to get somewhere, as against a walk for its own sake. **The parking dance** is going round for a space nearer the door. And **a reason I'd say out loud** is the test for when the car should win, which it sometimes should.

Before you go on, do one thing. For a week, keep a list. Every trip under a mile and every lift ride under three floors, with how you did it. Car, lift, walk, stairs. Don't change anything. Just write it down. At the end of the week, count. Most people who do this find twenty or thirty items on the list and two or three walks among them, and that ratio is what the rest of the book is about.

Why the keys seem sensible

I want to be fair to the default before I argue with it, because it isn't stupid and it isn't sloth. It's what a sensible person does when nobody's asked them to think about it.

The car is faster. Or it feels faster, and you've never timed it. Ten minutes on foot against three in the car, and three wins.

The weather. This is Britain. It rains, it's cold, it's dark by four in December, and the car has a roof and a heater.

You've got things to carry. The shopping, the child, the bag for work, the thing that needs returning. Legs don't have a boot.

You're tired. The day was long, and a walk at the end of it feels like one more demand.

It's not exercise anyway. A ten-minute stroll to the shop isn't going to change anything about your health, so why put yourself out for it. If you wanted to be fit you'd do something proper.

Everyone drives. The road outside the school is a queue of cars because that's how the school run is done. The lift lobby has four people in it because that's how you get to the second floor. Walking would mean being the odd one out.

The lift is right there. The stairs are through a door and round a corner and nobody uses them and you're not sure they're even unlocked.

And you'd arrive a mess. Sweaty for a meeting, or windswept, or with wet shoes. The car delivers you as you left.

There are needs under all of this. A need to get things done in a day that's already full. A need for comfort when it's wet and cold. A need to arrive presentable. A need not to spend energy you haven't got. None of these is going to be argued away and I won't try. What I'll show is that the default meets most of them badly, that the car is slower than it feels for the trips this book is about, that the walk is the thing that gives energy rather than taking it, and that the one reason on the list that's actually true, the big shop, is the one the rule makes room for.

"It's quicker to drive"

Start with the belief that does most of the work, because it's the one that feels like arithmetic.

Walking a mile at a brisk pace takes about twenty minutes. The NHS puts brisk at about three miles an hour, the pace at which you can talk but not sing. Half a mile is ten minutes. Now count the car, door to door. Find the keys. Get to the car. Start it, and if it's cold, wait for the windscreen. Reverse out. Drive, which on a half-mile trip through a town means junctions, a queue at the lights, and a speed that averages far below the number on the signs. Arrive. Do the parking dance, once round the car park for a space near the door. Park. Walk from the space to the door, which in a supermarket car park is often a hundred yards. Then the whole thing again in reverse, with the shopping.

I haven't seen a study that times this, so what follows is my reasoning and I'd rather you tested it than believed it. For half a mile in a town, the car's door-to-door time is usually between five and eight minutes each way, and the walk is ten. The car wins by a few minutes, not by the seven it felt like. For a quarter of a mile, the car often loses outright, because the fixed costs, keys, engine, parking, the walk from the space, don't shrink with the distance. And for a two-floor lift ride, the wait in the lobby is often longer than the stairs. Two floors is about thirty steps. A person who isn't running takes about forty seconds. The lift, with four people waiting and a stop on the first floor, takes longer than that as often as not.

A kettle is a fair comparison for two sentences. Nobody thinks it's quick to boil a kettle for one cup, because you're standing there for the whole of it. The car for half a mile is a kettle, and the reason it feels quick is that you're doing something for all of it, and the walk feels slow because you're doing nothing but walking.

Time it. That's the whole of this chapter's advice. Next time the keys come off the hook for a short trip, look at the clock as you pick them up, and look again when you're through the shop door. Then walk it once, and look at the clock the same way. The numbers are usually closer than you thought, and sometimes they're the wrong way round. Once you've seen that, "it's quicker to drive" stops being arithmetic and becomes what it always was, a feeling about the car.

"Walking isn't real exercise"

The next belief is that even if you walked, it wouldn't do anything. A stroll to the shop is nothing. Real exercise is a run, a class, a session with a start and a finish and a shower afterwards.

The NHS guidelines for adults are a hundred and fifty minutes of moderate intensity activity a week, or seventy-five of vigorous, and they list brisk walking first among the moderate examples. The NHS walking page says that a brisk ten-minute daily walk has health benefits and counts toward the hundred and fifty. So the official position isn't that walking is a poor relation. It's that walking at three miles an hour is the thing the target was written for. A ten-minute errand walk each way to the shop is twenty minutes of it, and five of those a week is most of the target on their own.

The evidence behind that is worth a paragraph, because it's stronger than most people expect. Paul Kelly and colleagues, in 2014, pooled fourteen studies of walking and mortality, covering about two hundred and eighty thousand people, and adjusted for all the other exercise those people did, so that the result was for walking on its own. At a standard weekly dose, which works out at roughly two to three hours of brisk walking a week by my conversion, regular walkers had an eleven per cent lower risk of dying from any cause over the follow-up. And the shape of the curve mattered. The biggest reduction in risk was in the lowest band of walking, between people who did almost none and people who did a little. The gains flatten as you walk more. They don't need you to walk far.

Steps tell the same story. Pedro Saint-Maurice and colleagues, in 2020, followed nearly five thousand American adults over forty who'd worn a step counter for a week, for about ten years. Compared with people taking four thousand steps a day, people taking eight thousand had about half the risk of dying over the follow-up, and people taking twelve thousand had lower risk again. How fast the steps were taken made no independent difference once the number of steps was accounted for. Four thousand extra steps is about two miles, and two miles is two errand walks.

These are observational studies. People who walk more may differ in other ways, and the researchers adjusted for the ways they could measure, which is never all of them. But the direction is consistent across every study of this kind, and the NHS's position rests on it. Walking is real exercise. It's the real exercise most of the evidence is about. The session with the shower is fine too, and there's a book in this series about it, but it's not what "counts" means.

"I'm on my feet all day"

A lot of readers have an answer ready, and it's that they're already active. They're on their feet all day. Teaching, nursing, the shop floor, the kitchen, a house with small children. Whatever the desk workers need, it isn't them.

I'd separate two things. Being on your feet is standing, and standing is better than sitting, but it isn't stepping. A person can stand for eight hours and cover very little ground, and it's the ground that the step studies measure. A nursery worker walks a lot. A person behind a counter mostly doesn't. The feeling of being active comes from being upright and busy, and it's an honest feeling, and it's a poor guide to distance.

The best way to find out is to measure a day. Most phones count steps whether you've asked them to or not, and a pedometer is cheap. Wear it for a normal working day and look at the number in the evening. I'd expect it to surprise you in one direction or the other. Some people on their feet all day find eleven thousand and can skip this book. More find four or five thousand, which is the bottom quartile in the large step studies, and a good deal less than the feeling suggested.

Amanda Paluch and colleagues, in 2022, pooled fifteen studies with over forty-seven thousand adults, and split them into quarters by steps. The medians of the four quarters were about three and a half thousand, five thousand eight hundred, seven thousand eight hundred and eleven thousand steps a day. Risk of death fell across the quarters, steeply at first. The benefit levelled off around six to

eight thousand for people over sixty, and eight to ten thousand for younger adults, and the researchers found little evidence for the ten thousand figure that's been repeated for decades. So the target, if you want one, is lower than you've heard. But the bottom quarter, where a lot of people on their feet all day turn out to be, is where the biggest gains are waiting.

I'm not going to ask you to hit a number. I'm asking you to find out what your number is, because "on my feet all day" is a description of posture and the studies are about distance, and the two come apart more often than you'd think. If yours is low, the errand walks in this book are the easiest way there is to raise it, because they replace something you were already doing.

"It doesn't count unless it's a proper walk"

There's a quieter version of the last two beliefs. Fine, walking counts. But a walk means a walk. Boots, a route, an hour on a Sunday. The ten minutes to the shop with a bag isn't a walk. It's an errand.

The legs don't know the difference. A mile to the shop and a mile round the park are the same mile to the muscles, the heart and the step counter. What differs is what you call it, and what you call it decides whether you do it, which is why this belief matters. If only proper walks count, the proper walk gets planned for Sunday, and the week has thirty short trips in it that all go by car because they don't count.

The NHS walking page is written entirely about errand walks. Its list of ways to walk more is walking part of your journey to work, walking to the shops, using the stairs instead of the lift, leaving the car behind for short journeys, walking the kids to school. There's a stroll after dinner on the list too, but the rest is transport. The official advice isn't asking you to find an hour. It's asking you to use your legs for the trips you're making anyway.

The Department for Transport's survey of how people in England travel counts walking in two ways. A walking trip is a journey made entirely on foot. A walking stage is the on-foot part of a longer journey, the walk to the station or from the car park. In 2024, people made about two hundred and sixty-seven walking trips each on average and walked about two hundred and thirty miles, which is the highest the survey has recorded since 2002.

Most of those trips are short. Only eighty-one of the two hundred and sixty-seven were a mile or more. The country's walking is mostly errand walking, and it's the errand walking that's been rising.

So keep the Sunday walk if you like it. It's a good thing. But the week is where the distance is, and the week is made of errands. A person who walks to the shop five times and up the stairs ten times has done more for their legs than a person who does one proper walk and drives everything else, and the first person didn't have to find an hour to do it. There's a book in this series for people whose problem is the proper session that never happens, and it's named in the notes. This one is about the trips that were happening already.

"The lift's right there"

Two floors. The lift is in front of you and the stairs are through a door. It's not a decision anyone makes, and I'd like to make it one.

The NHS guidelines list walking up stairs among the vigorous activities, alongside running and swimming. Vigorous means you're breathing hard and can't say more than a few words without a pause, and seventy-five minutes of it a week meets the target that takes a hundred and fifty of moderate. Two floors won't get you there. But two floors, four times a day, five days a week, is forty flights, and forty flights is a fair amount of vigorous activity that was on your route anyway.

There's a body of research on stairs and the heart. Sophie Paddock and colleagues published a meta-analysis in 2026 pooling nine studies with about four hundred and eighty thousand people, and found that people who climbed stairs had markedly lower rates of death from cardiovascular disease and somewhat lower death from any cause over the follow-ups. These were observational studies, and the obvious caution is that people who take the stairs are already fitter, and the studies can't fully separate the stairs from the fitness. I'd take from it only that the direction is the one you'd expect and that stairs are not a trivial thing. The NHS's classification of them as vigorous is enough on its own.

The practical case is simpler than the health case. Two floors is about thirty steps. At an ordinary pace that's forty seconds. The lift, when there are people waiting and it's stopping on the way, is often longer, and I'd ask you to time that too, because "the lift's

right there" is a statement about where it is and not about how long it takes. What's right there is the button. The lift is somewhere on the fourth floor with its doors open.

There's a version of this for the person who works on the eighth floor and can't take the stairs the whole way, and it's to get out at five and walk three. And there's one for anyone who finds the stairs hard, which is that hard is what vigorous means, and that the stairs get easier in weeks, and that if two floors leaves you unable to speak at the top, chapter 22 is where to look.

"I've got shopping and kids to carry"

Now the reason that's sometimes true, and I want to give it its due before I take most of it away.

The big shop is a reason. A week's food for a family doesn't go in a bag on foot, and nobody's asking you to try. If the trip is the big shop, take the car, and say so out loud, and that's the rule working as it should. The same goes for the sack of compost, the flat-pack, the child who's four and has just fallen asleep.

But look at the week's list from chapter 1 and count how many of the trips were that. Most of the shop trips are milk, bread, a thing you forgot, a bottle of wine for tonight. Those go in a bag, and a bag on a shoulder is what shopping was carried in for most of history. A backpack takes more than you'd think, and it changes the errand walk from a burden to nothing in particular. Keep one by the door.

Children walk. A four-year-old can walk six hundred yards, and does, at the park, without anyone remarking on it. A ten-year-old can walk a mile. The school run by car is the clearest example of the default there is, because the school is placed to be walkable and the road outside it is a queue of cars that have driven a distance the children could have covered in the time the queue takes. The Department for Transport's figures show that the share of children aged five to ten walking to school in England rose by five percentage points between 2019 and 2024. Some families have found this out.

If the objection is the timetable, that you're going on to work afterwards, then walk them there and back to the car, which is the same six hundred yards and the same ten minutes you'd have spent in the queue. If it's the younger one in the pram, the pram has wheels. If it's the bag, the child carries their bag, which they do at school all day. I'll come back to the school run in chapter 18, because it's teaching the children something either way.

So the honest version of the objection is this. Some trips carry too much to walk, and the rule lets those go by car. The rest were carrying a bag of milk, and the bag was the reason only because the car was there to make it one.

"I need the car for after"

There's an objection that sounds like logistics and mostly isn't. The shop is half a mile away, yes, but after the shop you're going on to the school, and after the school to the thing across town, so the car has to come out anyway, and once it's out you may as well use it for the shop.

Look at the chain. The shop is inside the circle. The school is inside the circle. The thing across town isn't. That's one trip that needs the car and two that don't, and the default has bundled all three into "the car's out anyway". The honest version is that you walk to the shop, walk to the school, come home, and then take the car across town. The car was going to do one trip. The chain made it do three.

"The car's already out" is the default's best trick, and it's worth seeing it as one. Once you're in the driving seat, every stop on the way becomes a car stop, because getting out and walking from a car you're already in feels absurd. So the chain gets planned around the car from the start, and the trips inside the circle get swallowed. The fix is to plan the chain the other way round. Which of these needs the car? That one. Do the rest on foot, before or after, and take the car out for the one.

Sometimes the chain genuinely can't be split. The shop, the school and the thing across town are all at four o'clock and the child can't wait. Then the car does all three and you say so out loud, and that's the rule working. But count how often that's true against how often "the car's out anyway" was the whole reason. The list from chapter

1 will show you. Most chains, in my experience, come apart into two short walks and one drive, and the walks are the ones that were being lost.

There's a version of this at work. The meeting is across the road, and afterwards you're going to the site, so you drive to the meeting. The meeting is a hundred yards away. Walk to the meeting, walk back, and then drive to the site. The parking rule in chapter 20 helps here too, because the far end of the car park puts a walk into the site trip that the chain would otherwise have taken out.

"It's raining"

This is Britain and it rains, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. But the objection does more work than the weather does, and I'd like to separate them.

Look at the list from chapter 1 and mark the trips where it was actually raining when you set out. Not grey, not threatening, not cold. Raining. In my experience of asking people to do this, the count is smaller than they'd have guessed, and smaller still if you subtract the days when it was drizzling and a coat would have done. Most of the weather that keeps people in the car is weather you'd walk through happily if you were already outside. It only looks bad through the window.

Rain also has a shape, like most weather, and a ten-minute walk usually fits inside a gap in it. If it's raining hard when you'd have set out, wait fifteen minutes and look again. More often than not it's eased. The car doesn't teach you that, because in the car the rain is something you drive through and never watch.

The coat is the answer to most of it. A coat with a hood on the peg by the door, and shoes that don't mind a puddle, and the errand walk goes ahead in anything short of a downpour. In a downpour, take the car and say so. That's a reason you'd say out loud, and the rule allows it.

The dark is a different objection and it's a real one for some routes. When the Department for Transport asked people in 2023 what would encourage them to walk more, half said nothing would, and

I'll come back to that half in chapter 15. Of the rest, the top answers were safer roads, meaning slower traffic and more considerate driving, and well-maintained pavements, meaning even, clean and lit. Those are answers about routes, not about weather. If the way to the shop is a lane with no pavement and no lights, that's not a default. That's a route that isn't safe on foot after dark, and chapter 22 is about what to do with it.

The cold, I'd only say, is what a coat is for, and that a person walking briskly is warm within five minutes in any British winter. The car, by contrast, is cold for the first five minutes of a short trip and has only just warmed up by the time you arrive.

"I'll arrive a mess"

Here's a belief that's mostly about a picture. You imagine arriving at the office, or the meeting, or the school gate, red-faced and damp from the walk, and the picture is enough to put the keys in your hand.

A mile at three miles an hour is a walk you can talk through. That's the NHS's own definition of the pace, talk but not sing, and it's chosen because it's the pace at which you get the benefit without the sweat. A person who's warm from twenty minutes of walking isn't a person who's been running. They're a person with a bit of colour, and the colour goes in the five minutes it takes to hang up a coat and sit down.

The NHS walking page has a plain answer to the clothes question, which is to wear your usual work clothes with a comfortable pair of shoes and change shoes when you get in. That's the whole of the logistics. A pair of shoes under the desk.

Rain is chapter 10. Wind is a coat and a minute in the loo with a comb. Hills are chapter 22, and if your walk to work has one, walk it a little slower and arrive a minute later and no warmer.

There's a small subset of readers for whom this is real, the ones whose walk to work is two miles with a hill at the end in July. For them the answer is a shirt in the bag and two minutes in the bathroom, which is what cyclists have been doing for a century,

and which stops being a thing to think about after the first week. For everyone else, the mile at the talking pace doesn't produce anything a coat and a comb don't handle.

The thing to notice about this belief is that it's a forecast. You haven't arrived a mess, because you haven't walked. You've imagined arriving a mess, and the imagining has a red face in it that the walk wouldn't produce. Walk it once, at the talking pace, with the shoes under the desk, and see what you look like in the lift lobby mirror. You'll look like someone who came in from outside, which is what you are every morning anyway.

"I don't have time"

This is the belief most readers will land on when the others have gone, and it deserves the best answer I can give it.

The first answer is chapter 3. For the trips this book is about, the time isn't as different as it feels, and sometimes it's the wrong way round. Time it before you decide it's a cost.

The second answer is that where there is a cost, the time isn't lost. It's moved, and it comes back with something attached. A twenty-minute walk is twenty minutes in which you can think, and the evidence is that you think differently while walking. Marilyn Oppezzo and Daniel Schwartz, in 2014, ran four experiments in which people did tests of creative thinking sitting down and then walking, on a treadmill and outdoors. Walking raised scores on the test of coming up with new uses for ordinary objects in most participants, and the boost lasted for a while after they sat down again. Walking outdoors gave the best results of all. The test was of the kind of thinking where you generate ideas, not the kind where you converge on one right answer, which walking didn't help. So the walk is a good place to put the problem you've been circling at your desk, and a poor place to do your tax return.

It's also a good place to put a phone call, a podcast, or nothing at all. The NHS walking page suggests music or a podcast to take your mind off the effort. I'd add that twenty minutes of nothing, on foot, is one of the few stretches of nothing left in most adult days, and people who take it tend to want it again.

And there's what the walk does to how you feel about the day. Adam Martin and colleagues, in 2014, used eighteen years of the British Household Panel Survey, with nearly eighteen thousand commuters, to look at how the way people got to work related to their psychological wellbeing, following the same people as their circumstances changed. Compared with driving, both walking or cycling and public transport went with better wellbeing on a standard questionnaire. Each extra ten minutes of walking to work went with a small rise, and each extra ten minutes of driving with a small fall. People who switched from the car to walking or cycling showed a rise larger than either. This is observational, and the effects were modest on the scale used, but the direction is the one that matters for the objection. Time spent driving isn't neutral time. It's time that goes with feeling slightly worse. Time spent walking goes with feeling slightly better. The twenty minutes you'd be saving in the car aren't free.

Mark Hamer and Yoichi Chida, in a 2008 review of eight studies with over a hundred and seventy thousand people, found that walking or cycling to work went with an eleven per cent lower risk of cardiovascular disease over the follow-ups, an effect that was clearer in women. Same caveats, same direction.

So the honest accounting is this. On a short trip, the walk costs a few minutes more than the car at most. In exchange you get twenty minutes you can think in, a small lift in how you feel about the day, and the health effect from chapter 4, and the car's few minutes come with the parking dance and a small drop in mood. The walk isn't the expensive option. It's the option that was never priced.

"I'm too tired"

The last objection before the social ones is the one you'll have at half past five. You're tired. The walk is one more thing. The car is the kind option.

There's an old study that speaks to this directly, and I'll describe it carefully because it's small. Robert Thayer, in 1987, had eighteen volunteers, on twelve separate days, either eat a chocolate bar or walk briskly for ten minutes, then rate their energy, tiredness and tension over the following two hours while going about their day. The walk raised energy and lowered tension, and the effect lasted the full two hours. The chocolate bar raised energy briefly and then, an hour later, left people more tired and more tense than before. Eighteen people is not many, and the study is nearly forty years old. But it's the plainest test I know of the belief that tiredness is a reason not to move, and it found the reverse.

The reason, I think, is that most of the tiredness at half past five is the tiredness of a still day, and stillness isn't cured by more stillness. It's cured by a change of state, and a ten-minute walk is the cheapest change of state there is. There's a book in this series about the chair and what a day in it does, and it's named in the notes. Here I'd only say that the tired feeling at the end of a day at a desk is a poor guide to what your legs can do, and that the walk home, or the walk to the shop before dinner, is the thing most likely to end the tiredness rather than the thing most likely to deepen it.

Try it once at the worst time. When you're most tired and the keys are in your hand, walk the half mile instead, at the talking pace, and notice how you feel at the far end. Not at the start, where the objection lives, but at the shop door. In my experience most people feel better there than they did at the hook.

"It's too late to start"

Some readers are past sixty, and the objection they'll have is that this is a book for younger people. Whatever the walking would have done, it needed to be done thirty years ago. The legs are what they are now.

The evidence runs the other way, and it runs the other way most strongly for exactly this reader. Kelly's pooled studies found the largest fall in risk in the lowest band of walking, between people who did almost none and people who did a little, and that shape doesn't reverse with age. Paluch's fifteen cohorts found that for people over sixty the benefit of more steps kept rising until about six to eight thousand a day, lower than the figure for younger adults, and that the steepest part of the curve was at the bottom, among people taking a few thousand steps. A person of sixty-five taking three thousand steps a day is not a person for whom it's too late. They're the person in the studies with the most to gain from the next two thousand, and two thousand steps is a mile, and a mile is the shop.

What is true is that the line moves. The NHS advice for people who haven't been active for a while is to increase gradually, and half a mile and one floor is a fine place to start at any age. It's also true that a body which has been driven everywhere for thirty years will complain for a fortnight, and that the complaint is the body noticing and not the body objecting. Chapter 22 has the cautions, and they apply, and they're cautions about how to start and not reasons not to.

The other thing to say is about the legs at seventy-five and eighty, which chapter 17 touched on. The ability to walk to the shop in later life isn't a fixed allowance that runs out. It's kept by being used and lost by not being, and the people who can still do it at eighty are, for the most part, the people who did it at sixty-five. Starting now is what decides that. The person for whom it's too late is the person who decides it is.

If you're reading this at seventy, the rule is the same and the line is yours. Half a mile, one floor, a coat, the shoes by the door. The shop is where it always was.

"Everyone drives, it's how things are here"

Some of the default isn't yours. It's the place's. The road outside the school is a queue because everyone queues. The lift lobby is full because everyone rides. To walk is to be the only one, and being the only one is tiring in a way that has nothing to do with legs.

The figures bear you out, to a point. In 2024, cars accounted for fifty-nine per cent of all trips in England and seventy-six per cent of all the miles. Driving is how things are done. But the same survey found that people made two hundred and sixty-seven walking trips each on average that year, and walked further than in any year since the survey began in 2002, and that "just walk" was the third commonest reason for any trip at all. So everyone drives, and everyone also walks, and the second number is rising while the first is flat. You'd be joining something, not leaving it.

There's another figure in the survey that I find more interesting. In 2023, when people were asked what would encourage them to walk more, the commonest answer, from half of them, was nothing. Not better pavements, not safer roads. Nothing. I'd read that as the default speaking. It's not a considered position. It's what a person says when they've never had a reason to consider the question, and the car is on the drive, and the question sounds like a criticism. If you'd been asked that question a month ago, you might have said nothing too, and here you are with a list of thirty trips.

What you can't change is the road outside the school. What you can change is the default in your own house, and a house's default is contagious in both directions. The next chapter but two is about

that. For now I'd only say that "everyone drives" is a description of the car park and not an instruction, and that the person who walks to the school gate isn't the odd one out. They're the one who isn't in the queue.

"I'm not one of those people"

Under some of the resistance there's an identity, and it's worth naming so that it can be put down.

You know the people who walk everywhere. The one with the boots and the rucksack who talks about routes. The cyclist in the office who arrives in lycra and makes a thing of it. The colleague who takes the stairs and mentions it. You don't want to be any of them, and walking to the shop feels like the first step towards becoming one.

It isn't, and the reason is that the errand walk isn't a type. Nobody has ever been described as a walker for going to the shop on foot. The rambler is defined by the Sunday and the boots. The cyclist by the kit. The stair-taker by the mentioning. What you'd be doing is going to the shop, with a bag, in your ordinary shoes, and coming back, and nobody at the shop or in the street will register it as anything at all. There's no identity available to you here even if you wanted one. It's too ordinary.

That's the thing I'd most like you to see about this habit. The change it asks for is invisible. You won't need equipment, a club, an app or a story about yourself. You'll need a coat on the peg and shoes by the door, and the person you'll become is the person you were with slightly more distance in their day. The colleague who mentions the stairs is a different problem, and this book won't make you into them, because it doesn't ask you to mention anything.

If anything, the identity runs the other way. The person who drives half a mile for milk and rides two floors is, from the outside, a type too, and not one anybody chooses. You'd be leaving that one, quietly, and joining nothing.

What the default costs you

I've argued the reasons. This chapter is the bill.

The distance. Chapter 5's step count, if you took it, is the first line. A person in the bottom quarter of the step studies is a person for whom the biggest gains in the evidence are still on the table, and the default is what's keeping them there. Saint-Maurice's four thousand against eight thousand is two miles a day, and two miles a day is the errand walks you're driving.

The mood. Martin's ten minutes of driving is a small fall and ten minutes of walking a small rise, and a day with four short car trips in it is forty minutes of the first and none of the second. Over a year that's a lot of small falls. You wouldn't notice any one of them. You might notice the sum, and call it something else.

The money. Short car trips are the expensive ones per mile, because the engine's cold, and the fuel, the parking and the wear are all spent on distances that cost nothing on foot. Work out what the half-mile trips in your week cost, over a year, and then look at what the walk would have cost, which is a pair of shoes.

The thinking time. Oppezzo's walkers had better ideas walking than sitting, and the walk to the shop is twenty minutes a day in which the problem you've been circling could have moved. In the car you're driving.

The neighbourhood. A person who drives everything under a mile doesn't know the streets they live in. They know the routes. On foot you find the path between the houses, the shop you didn't know

was there, the neighbour whose name you'd forgotten. That's not a health cost. It's the cost of living somewhere for years without having been there.

The legs at seventy. The evidence on walking and mortality is about the long run, and so is the evidence on what happens to legs that aren't used. A person who walks to the shop at forty-five is, in all likelihood, a person who can still walk to the shop at seventy-five, and the second thing depends on the first more than most people think. The default isn't just a habit of this week. It's a policy about which body you'll have later.

And the children in the back, which is the next chapter, because it's a cost that lands on someone else.

The children in the back

If you drive the six hundred yards to school, the children are in the car, and they're learning something.

Jordan Carlson, James Sallis and colleagues, in 2014, studied nearly three hundred American twelve to fifteen-year-olds who lived within two miles of their school, and looked at what predicted whether they walked or cycled there. Several things did, including how safe the streets felt and how the neighbourhood was laid out. But one of the strongest predictors was whether the parents themselves walked or cycled for transport. Teenagers whose parents did were more than three times as likely to be habitual active travellers to school. It's one American study and it can't prove that the parents caused it. But it's what you'd expect, and it's what the school run teaches either way. A child driven six hundred yards learns that six hundred yards is a car distance. A child walked learns it's a walk.

The school run on foot has other things in it. Ten minutes of conversation each way that doesn't happen in a car with the radio on. A child who arrives at school having moved, which teachers will tell you makes a difference to the first hour. A child who knows the route, and at ten can do it alone, which is a freedom the car never gives them.

If you're thinking that the mornings are too tight, I'd say what chapter 8 said. The queue outside the gate is longer than the walk. Walk them to the gate and back to the car, and you've spent the

same ten minutes standing on your feet instead of sitting in a queue, and the child has walked. Twice a week is a start.

There's a partner in some households who'd walk if you did, and doesn't because the keys are always in your hand and the car is always going anyway. Nobody says this. It's just easier to get in. A house where one person starts walking the short trips is a house where the other person often finds they'd rather walk too, and the children follow both of you.

Chapter 15 said that the default in a house is contagious in both directions. This is the direction you'd want.

Setting the line

The next two chapters are the method. This one draws the line. The next one moves the keys.

A mile and three floors. That's where I'd start, and I'd start there rather than somewhere ambitious because a line that's easy to keep is a line that gets kept. A mile is twenty minutes at the talking pace. Three floors is a minute and a half. Below those, you walk, unless there's a reason you'd say out loud. Above them, you decide as you always did. In a month you can move the line if you want to.

Draw the map. Take a map of where you live and draw a circle a mile across, centred on your front door. Do the same for work. Everything inside the circle is inside the line. Most people find the shop, the school, the pharmacy, the post office, a friend or two, the station and the pub inside the first circle, and the sandwich place and the meeting across the road inside the second. That's the list of trips this book is about, and seeing them on a map does something a rule doesn't.

List the regulars. From the week's list in chapter 1, pick the five trips you make most often inside the circle. Those five are the habit. If they go on foot, the rule is mostly kept, whatever happens with the rest.

Time the top five. Once each way by car, door to door, honestly, with the parking. Once each way on foot. Write the numbers next to each other. This is chapter 3's test done properly, and it's the

single most persuasive thing you'll do, because for at least one of the five the walk will be as quick as the car, and for the rest it'll be closer than you'd have said.

Say the reasons out loud. Before the rule starts, write down the reasons that would let the car win. The big shop. A downpour. A child who can't walk today. A route that isn't safe in the dark. A bad knee on a bad day. Three or four of those. The test for a reason is whether you'd say it to a friend without embarrassment. "It was raining" passes. "I had the keys in my hand" doesn't.

Move the line later, not now. After a month, if a mile has become nothing, make it a mile and a half. If three floors is easy, make it five. The line is yours and it's meant to move. It just shouldn't move in the first fortnight, because the first fortnight is where the default fights back and a fixed line is what beats it.

The keys and the button

The line does nothing on its own. The default runs on the keys being on the hook by the door and the button being in front of you, and the method is to put a step in front of each.

Keys with a step in them. Not on the hook by the door. In a drawer in the kitchen, or a bag, or upstairs. The point is that picking them up becomes a thing you go and do, and going and doing is a decision, and a decision is where the line gets applied. If the keys are on the hook, the hand takes them on the way past and the line never gets a look in.

Shoes by the door. The pair you can walk a mile in, where the keys used to be. When you go to leave, the first thing you see is the shoes. This is small and it's most of the method.

The bag. A backpack or a shoulder bag on the peg with the coat, empty, ready. Chapter 8's answer to the shopping objection is a bag that's already there.

The stair rule. In any building where you know where the stairs are, the stairs for anything under three floors, and the lift only above. In a building where you don't know where the stairs are, find them once. They're usually through the door beside the lift and they're never locked, because they're a fire escape.

The parking rule. For trips outside the line that still need the car, park at the far end of the car park and walk. First space you see, not the nearest to the door. This ends the parking dance, which was

costing you time as well as distance, and it puts two hundred yards of walking into every trip that couldn't be walked.

Walk part of the longer journey. The NHS's first suggestion for walking more is to walk part of the journey to work. If the commute is too far to walk, it may not be too far to park a mile off and walk the last of it, or to get off the bus a stop early. The line applies to the last mile of a long trip as well as to the whole of a short one.

The school run on foot, twice a week. Not every day yet. Pick two mornings, the ones with the least in them, and walk. Once it's two, it'll become three on its own.

The week's list, kept going. Keep the list from chapter 1 for a second week, and a third. Watch the column change. The list is how you'll know the line is being kept, and it's also how you'll catch the trips that slipped through, which the next chapter but one is about.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and I'd like the decision to fit in one sentence.

If it's under a mile, I walk. If it's under three floors, I take the stairs. Unless I've got a reason I'd say out loud.

Three parts.

The first is the line. A mile, three floors, drawn on a map, with the top five regulars timed both ways. Fixed for a fortnight.

The second is the arrangements. Keys with a step in them, shoes by the door, the bag on the peg, the far end of the car park, two school runs on foot.

The third is the reason. Written down in advance, said out loud when used, and used honestly. The big shop is a reason. The keys being in your hand is not.

There's a form of planning that helps with rules like this, and it's been tested many times. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed ninety-four studies of it in 2006. You decide in advance what you'll do and when, in the form "when this happens, I'll do that", and people who plan that way follow through much more often than people who only hold the intention. So write three.

When I need something from the shop, I'll put the shoes on and take the bag.

When I'm in the lift lobby and it's under three floors, I'll go through the door to the stairs.

When I'm driving somewhere outside the line, I'll take the first space I see and walk from it.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The first few days you'll find the keys in your hand before you've thought, because the default is fast, and you'll put them back in the drawer with a small feeling of foolishness. That passes. By the end of the first week the shoes by the door will have started doing their work and two or three of the top five will have gone on foot. You'll have timed at least one and been surprised. Around the second week the stairs will have stopped being a decision, because the stairs are the easiest part of this and the body learns them fastest. Somewhere in the first month you'll walk to the shop in the rain in a coat and find it was fine, and that's the day the weather objection ends. The step count, if you're keeping one, will be a couple of thousand higher than it was on the same working day a month before, without anything you'd call exercise having happened. And you'll notice, on the walk home from something, that you're thinking about a thing you've been stuck on, and that it's moving.

Hills, hips, dark lanes, prams and when to check with a GP

The rule holds everywhere, but some bodies and some places need their own paragraph.

Joints. If knees, hips or ankles complain, the NHS advice is to increase walking distance gradually, and to look at swimming pool exercise classes if joints are a problem, because the water supports them. Set the line at half a mile and one floor, keep it there for a month, and move it when the joints have stopped commenting. Downhill is harder on knees than uphill, and a stick on a steep route isn't a defeat.

Breathlessness and chest pain. Stairs are vigorous, and being out of breath at the top of two floors is normal for a person who's been taking the lift for years. Being unable to speak at the top, or feeling faint, or any pain in the chest, arm or jaw, isn't, and it's a GP appointment. Chest pain that doesn't go away when you stop, or that comes with sweating, sickness or breathlessness, is 999, and I'd rather you rang and were wrong than didn't.

Hills. A hill on the way to the shop is a reason to walk slower, not to drive. At the talking pace you'll arrive later and no warmer. If the hill is steep enough that you can't talk, you've found the vigorous version of the errand walk, and you can do it at whatever pace lets you talk.

Disability and age. The line is yours. If a mile isn't possible, the argument holds at whatever distance is, and the errand walk that's two hundred yards to the corner is the same argument as the mile. Set it with a GP or a physio if you'd like a second opinion. What the book objects to is legs that could and don't, not legs that can't.

Dark lanes and no pavements. Some routes aren't safe on foot, especially after dark, and chapter 10 said so. A road with no pavement, no lights and fast traffic is a reason you'd say out loud, and you should say it and drive. What I'd ask is that you check whether the route you've been driving is that, or whether it's a route you've never walked and assumed. Many are the second. And there's often another way, on foot, that the car can't take, between the houses or through the park.

Prams and small children. A pram is a walking aid, in effect, and a child in one is a child being walked. The mile is longer with a toddler who wants to look at every gate, and the line for those trips can be half a mile for a year or two. They grow.

Rural. If the nearest shop is four miles away, the line doesn't reach it, and that's fine. The rule still applies to the village, the school if there is one, and the far end of the car park in town. And a mile of country lane is a better walk than most towns can offer.

Cycling. Everything in this book applies with a bike to trips of up to three or four miles, and the evidence in chapter 12 on active commuting covered cycling as well as walking. A bike moves the line out. That's a book of its own and I'll leave it there.

Winter. The line doesn't change. The coat does. If the pavements are iced, that's a reason you'd say out loud, and it happens a few days a year.

The reader who can't. If you've read this far and the honest answer is that walking a mile isn't something your body can do just now, for any reason, then the book isn't about you, and I'd rather say that plainly than have you feel judged by it. Talk to a GP about what distance is right, set the line there, and take what applies.

When you drove

It'll happen, probably in the first week. You'll be back from the shop with the milk and realise you drove, and that you never thought about it, and the keys were in your hand and then you were reversing. Then the thought will come that the rule's failed.

One drive isn't the week. The week's list will show a column with a few walks in it that wasn't there a fortnight ago, and one drive is one line on that list. What happened is that the default is fast, faster than a new rule, and it got through. It'll get through again. The rule is about the ratio, not about a perfect record.

Say the reason out loud, honestly. If there was one, "it was chucking it down", fine, that's the rule working. If there wasn't, "I had the keys in my hand", that's the information you need, because it tells you the keys are still somewhere the hand can find them without a decision. Move them.

Work out which default won. Was it the keys on the hook? The shoes not by the door? The trip you hadn't timed, so you still believed the car was quicker? A time of day when you're tired and the line goes soft? Each of those has a small fix in chapters 19 and 20, and none of them needs a fresh start.

There's a particular slip worth naming, which is the one that comes after a bad day. You're tired, it's dark, the shop's half a mile off and the keys are in the drawer, and you go to the drawer and take them. That's not the default. That's a decision, made with the line in view, and it was a poor one but it was yours. The rule allows

for those. What it asks is that you notice you made it, and that "I was tired" gets said out loud and weighed against chapter 13, which found that the walk is the thing that fixes the tiredness. Next time you're at the drawer, the memory of that chapter is what you take instead of the keys.

No streaks. Don't count days without a drive. Count walks in the week, and watch the number go up. A streak makes one drive feel like losing something, and you haven't lost anything. You've driven half a mile, which you've been doing for years, and tomorrow the shoes are by the door.

The car keys, again

You've run out of milk. The shop is half a mile away. The shoes are by the door and the bag is on the peg and the keys are in the kitchen drawer, and you put the shoes on without thinking about it, which is the point, because the default has changed sides. It's ten minutes. On the way you pass the path between the houses that you didn't know was there a month ago, and the neighbour with the dog says morning. At the shop you don't park. You go in, get the milk, and walk back with it in the bag, and you're thinking about the thing at work that you've been stuck on, and by the gate it's moved.

At work you go through the door to the left of the lift and up two floors, and you're a little out of breath at the top, less than you were a month ago, and you're at your desk while the lobby is still looking at the numbers. On Thursday you walk to the school, and your daughter walks back, and she tells you a thing about a girl in her class that she wouldn't have told you in the car, and you pass the queue of cars outside the gate and neither of you says anything about it.

The car's still on the drive. You used it on Saturday for the big shop, and said so, and on Tuesday because it was raining in the way that means it, and on Wednesday because you had the keys in your hand, which you noticed at the shop and put on the list. The list has four weeks on it now. The first week had three walks and twenty-six drives. The last had nineteen walks and eight drives, and six of the eight had reasons you'd say out loud.

None of this is a transformation. You didn't take up anything. You've got the same coat and the same shoes and the same shop, and nobody in your life has noticed a change except your daughter, who's asked if she can walk to school by herself next year. The step count on your phone is two and a half thousand higher on a working day than it was, and you'd have to look at the phone to know it, because it doesn't feel like anything. It feels like going to the shop.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Tonight, put the keys in a drawer and a pair of shoes by the door, and tomorrow, when you need something from the shop, walk there. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical advice, and it's no substitute for a GP or a physiotherapist who knows you. The NHS guidance I mention is for England as I found it in September 2026, and the travel figures are the Department for Transport's National Travel Survey for 2024, which covers England.

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 or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 3, 9, 11, 16, 19, 20, 23 and 24. The shop, the second-floor office, the car park and the school six hundred yards away are invented.

Before you start. The NHS page "Physical activity guidelines for adults aged 19 to 64", for the advice to speak to a GP first if you've been inactive or have a condition. The 999 guidance for chest pain is from the NHS chest pain page.

Chapter 3. The NHS page "Walking for health", for three miles an hour and the talk-but-not-sing test. The door-to-door timings are my estimates and the chapter asks you to test them. I know of no study that times short car trips against walking door to door.

Chapter 4. The NHS guidelines page as above, and "Walking for health", for brisk walking counting toward the target. Kelly, Kahlmeier, Götschi, Orsini, Richards, Roberts and colleagues, "Systematic review and meta-analysis of reduction in all-cause mortality from walking and cycling and shape of dose response relationship", International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity 11, 2014, article 132. Fourteen studies for walking, adjusted for other physical activity. The standard dose was 11.25 MET hours a week, and my conversion of that to two to three hours of brisk walking assumes brisk walking at about four METs and is approximate. Saint-Maurice, Troiano, Bassett, Graubard, Carlson, Shiroma and colleagues, "Association of daily step count and step intensity with mortality among US adults", Journal of the American Medical Association 323, 2020, pages 1151 to 1160. Four thousand eight hundred and forty adults over forty, followed for about ten years. Both are observational. The book on exercise sessions is Ten minutes counts, in this series.

Chapter 5. Paluch and colleagues, "Daily steps and all-cause mortality: a meta-analysis of 15 international cohorts", Lancet Public Health 7, 2022, pages e219 to e228. Forty-seven thousand adults. The claim that standing isn't stepping is mine.

Chapter 6. The NHS page "Walking for health", for the list of ways to walk more. The Department for Transport, National Travel Survey 2024, active travel chapter, for walking trips, stages, miles and trips of a mile or more. England only.

Chapter 7. The NHS guidelines page, for walking up stairs as vigorous activity. Paddock, Veerni, Bhalraam, Meng, Dawson-Plincke, Tsampasian and colleagues, "Evaluating the impact of

stair climbing on cardiovascular risk reduction: a systematic review and meta-analysis", American Journal of Cardiovascular Drugs, 2026, published online. Nine studies, observational, and the chapter states the limitation. The timings for two floors are mine.

Chapter 8. The National Travel Survey 2024 factsheet, for the change in children walking to school. The rest is mine.

Chapter 10. The National Travel Survey 2024 active travel chapter, for the 2023 question on what would encourage people to walk more. The claim about how many rainy days there are is my expectation from asking people and not a figure.

Chapter 11. The NHS page "Walking for health", for the advice on clothes and shoes.

Chapter 12. Oppezzo and Schwartz, "Give your ideas some legs: the positive effect of walking on creative thinking", Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition 40, 2014, pages 1142 to 1152. Four experiments. Martin, Goryakin and Suhrcke, "Does active commuting improve psychological wellbeing? Longitudinal evidence from eighteen waves of the British Household Panel Survey", Preventive Medicine 69, 2014, pages 296 to 303. Nearly eighteen thousand commuters, fixed effects models, effects modest on a thirty-six point scale. Hamer and Chida, "Active commuting and cardiovascular risk: a meta-analytic review", Preventive Medicine 46, 2008, pages 9 to 13. Eight studies. The NHS page "Walking for health", for music and podcasts. The time-relocated argument is mine.

Chapter 13. Thayer, "Energy, tiredness, and tension effects of a sugar snack versus moderate exercise", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 52, 1987, pages 119 to 125. Eighteen volunteers, which the chapter says. The book on sitting is The chair is winning, in this series.

Chapter 14. Kelly and colleagues and Paluch and colleagues as above. The NHS page "Walking for health", for increasing gradually. The claim about legs at eighty is my reasoning.

Chapter 15. The National Travel Survey 2024 factsheet and active travel chapter, for the share of trips by car, walking trips and miles, "just walk", and the 2023 question. The reading of the fifty per cent as the default speaking is mine.

Chapter 17. Saint-Maurice and colleagues, Martin and colleagues, and Oppezzo and Schwartz as above. The claims about money, the neighbourhood and the legs at seventy are my reasoning.

Chapter 18. Carlson, Sallis, Kerr, Conway, Cain, Frank and colleagues, "Built environment characteristics and parent active transportation are associated with active travel to school in youth age 12-15", British Journal of Sports Medicine 48, 2014, pages 1634 to 1639. Two hundred and ninety-four American adolescents, observational. What the school run teaches is my reasoning.

Chapter 21. 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 hasn't been tested as a package, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 22. The NHS pages "Walking for health" and the adult guidelines as above, for joints, gradual increase and pool classes. The chest pain guidance as above.