

# YOUR GOOD HEALTH

## Step it up?

In the battle of fitness trackers, the most steps might not win

By Bruce Horovitz

Kaiser Health News

**W**hen Sonia Anderson got her first Fitbit step tracker, her poor pooch, Bronx, had no idea of all the steps that were coming.

The device — which counts every step Anderson takes and displays those steps on an app — was a Christmas gift from her daughters two years ago.

At the time, Bronx, a Yorkshire terrier, was younger and could still manage the additional walks up and down the trails along the sprawling apartment complex in Alexandria, Virginia, where Anderson lives. Anderson was on a mission to clock 10,000 steps a day.

More recently, as Bronx hit age 13, the dog started coming to dead stops during these long treks, as if to ask: What's going on here?

Like many other folks 50 and older, the 63-year-old Anderson has been commanded by the step-tracker craze that began about a decade ago, and her dog is an unwilling victim.

Anderson has bought into the \$26 billion global step tracker industry and matches her daily count with her Fitbit-wearing friend, Landy Sorensen, 43. The two women have become inseparable Fitbit fanatics and competitors at the Arlington Food Assistance Center, where they amass additional steps every Friday morning while volunteering in the food bank. Now, they diligently count each other's steps on their cellphone apps in real time — and compete to record just one more step than the other.

"My Fitbit made me a friend I'd have never had," Anderson said.

It might also help her live longer, according to a recent Harvard University study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The study concluded that among older women, as few as 4,400 steps per day helped to lower mortality rates.

With more steps per day, mortality rates decreased before leveling off at 7,500 steps, the study found.

In other words, the magic marketing number of 10,000 daily steps embraced by so many wearers of these devices may be about 2,500 steps more than necessary.

Truth be told, even the woman behind the study — who concedes that she, too, is enamored of her step tracker — can't say how many steps are the right number for each walker.

"No one size fits all," said I-Min Lee, an associate epidemiologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and a professor at Harvard Medical School.

But no matter how many steps you take, merely wearing and using a fitness tracker — particularly for older women, older men and other people who tend to be somewhat inactive — "can be beneficial not only to your health but to your quality of life," Lee said.

Studies show that 150 minutes a week



**Above: Sonia Anderson and Bronx, her Yorkshire terrier, walk on the trails near her apartment complex in Alexandria, Va.**

**Left: Anderson checks her Fitbit. A recent Harvard University study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* concluded that, among older women, as few as 4,400 steps per day helped to lower mortality rates.**

[Scott Suchman for KHN]

### By the numbers

#### 4,400

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#### 7,500

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#### 150

Studies show that 150 minutes a week of moderate activity, such as walking, can lower the risk of heart disease and stroke, improve sleep, help reduce weight gain and improve bone health.

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Perhaps no one knows that better than Tom Holland, an exercise physiologist and sports nutritionist who has regularly appeared on "Good Morning America" as a fitness coach.

He also has worked as a personal trainer with thousands of clients — many of whom use step trackers. He's a huge fan of fitness trackers because they get people moving.

"The fitness tracker is the first step to getting people off the couch," he said. At the same time, he is put off by the much-ballyhooed 10,000-step daily goal, which he said is arbitrary.

"We need real numbers to shoot for," he said. Holland, who recently turned 50, prefers recommending smaller amounts of exercise — not big feats such as 10,000 steps. "I'm a big believer in excessive moderation. Don't do a lot a little bit — do a little bit a lot."

As for Anderson's little dog, Bronx, he sometimes gets extra incentive to go on those walks. Occasionally, Anderson brings along her daughter's English bulldog, Winston, whose namesake is the British statesman Winston Churchill. Perhaps, in a cosmic nod to future step trackers of all kinds, it was Churchill who said it best: "I never worry about action, but only inaction."



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