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Taking Flight

The title of this newsletter would suggest that I'm going to discuss something related to aircraft, or perhaps to birds. However, in spite of living and working in the "birthplace of aviation," my topic is the ascent associated with a different type of flight, that is, a series of stairs rising from one landing to another.

A recent article about stair climbing, published in the American Journal of Health Promotion, caught the attention of the wider media. United Kingdom investigators posted message banners at a stairway in a shopping mall to determine whether pedestrians would increase their use of the stairs over the escalator. Examples of the messages were: "Take the stairs. Stair climbing burns more calories per minute than jogging." "7 minutes of stair climbing per day protects your heart." The signs were effective. More people used the stairs.

What caught my attention about the article, however, was that this was nothing new. Other scientific studies have found that reminding people that it is healthy to use stairs leads people to increase their use of stairs. When I subsequently reviewed the actual article, I found that what was indeed new in this study was that the increased stair use generalized to more use of a separate flight of stairs where there were no banners. Furthermore, increased stair use continued at both flights of stairs for at least 5 weeks after the banners at the one stairway were removed.

In addition to reminder signs at the “point of decision” near a stairway, other studies have shown that the visibility of stairs and the attractiveness of the stairway (including artwork and music) are both associated with increased stair use. From a public health standpoint, it is unfortunate that the stairways in many public buildings are neither easily found nor perceived to be safe or attractive.

Does “taking flight” matter all that much? An analysis published in Obesity Reviews (2006) found that using stairs one time (up and down) each workday for an entire year translates to a weight loss or weight gain prevention of 300 grams (.66 pound). While that is very little weight, using the stairway twice a day for 5 years would represent a weight loss or weight gain prevention of 6.6 pounds. Given that most people gain weight gradually over a number of years, even minimal stair usage can be a small but important contributor to weight management.

It is unlikely that you will encounter signs reminding you to use the stairs when you are in malls or retail stores during this shopping (i.e., “holiday”) season. Chances are good, however, that you will encounter the choice between an escalator and stairs. For persons able to use stairs, “taking flight” is a series of steps in the interest of health.

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