**Stronger, healthy habits = stronger, better health**

In new research called The Vitality Habit Index, Vitality in partnership with the London School of Economics explores what it means to form a habit and why healthy habits are so important for better health outcomes.

Presenting at the Global Vitality Conference in London earlier this month, Discovery Chief Executive Adrian Gore outlined the report’s research methodology and key insights. Based on one of the world’s most extensive and longitudinal behavioural and health status data repositories that Vitality established – the Index suggests that while habits hold the key to achieving positive health outcomes, they are also the stumbling block preventing many people from reaching goals despite their best intentions.

**So, what is a behaviour and what is a habit?**

In the Vitality Habit Index, the following definitions are helpful in understanding the differences between behaviour and habits.

**Behaviour** is anaction that is motivated by a desired outcome. For example, going for a run is a behaviour to lose weight as the goal. The behaviour of running may be temporary and will only be repeated while the desire, in this case to lose weight, is relevant.

**Habits,** on the other hand,are specific activities that are done frequently and, over time, they become automatic in our lives. This is achieved through repetition and consistent practice, like brushing our teeth twice daily.

What this means is that a healthy behaviour becomes a healthy habit when the action continues even after the original goal or desire is no longer relevant. This is crucial for our long-term health.

**Quantifying habit formation**

Recognising the important role that habits play in shaping health outcomes, Vitality has developed the Habit Index as a data-driven tool to quantify habit formation. This tool scientifically defines habits using verifiable data related to physical activity and nutrition.

Through its development, Vitality aims to understand the impact of lifestyle choices on wellness, understand why individuals often struggle to stick to exercise and nutrition goals, identify how to form healthy habits, and which habits are more likely to stick.

The Habit Index also introduces the concept of habit laddering, when one habit triggers another, often better, habit.

**Here’s an example:**

* You get home from work (or move out of your home office)
* Next, you change out of your work clothes into activewear
* Now in activewear, you’re more likely to go for an evening walk/run
* After the exercise, you’re hungry which then cues dinnertime
* Having just exercised, you’re more likely to want a healthy meal
* This means you’ll probably cook at home rather than get a takeout
* The benefit of exercise means you’re more likely to get better sleep
* And better sleep means you wake up feeling more refreshed
* Before starting your work day, you lay out your work-out clothes for later that day

... and repeat.

Research shows that between 40% and 50% of our lives is governed by habit. This is a tremendous amount, so if someone builds healthy habits over time, the chance of them living a healthy life is significantly greater than someone who instead builds unhealthy habits.

The good news is that the habit you consistently choose becomes the habit you’ll repeat. It all depends on which behaviour you do often enough. And through the design and rewards structure built into the Vitality programme, this becomes much easier for Vitality members.

To read the full report, download the Vitality Habit Index.