

# Health Benefits of Walking

*"Walking is our best strategy for improving health....The epidemic of chronic diseases is becoming the number-one cost issue in almost every country in the world. We need a national agenda that creates a culture of health and where people can walk. Walking can be done anywhere, all you need is shoes.... It can be done easily and has huge benefits."*

— George Halvorson,  
Chairman & CEO, Kaiser Permanente

## Problem Overview

- The average American spends more than 100 hours commuting to work each year.<sup>1</sup>
- Each hour spent in a car per day is associated with a 6% increase in the likelihood of obesity.<sup>2</sup>
- The 2009 National Household Travel Survey revealed that walking trips accounted for 11% of all reported travel trips, yet walking projects receive less than 2% of federal transportation funding.
- In 1974, 66% of children in the U.S. walked or rode a bicycle to school, and by 2000, that number dropped to 13%<sup>3</sup>, more than an 80% decrease.
- This drastic erosion of walking contributes significantly to the health crisis that is rooted in Americans' lack of physical activity:
  - » Less than half of Americans meet the physical activity guidelines<sup>4</sup> of 150 minutes per week of moderate physical activity for adults and 420 minutes per week for youth.<sup>5</sup>
  - » Between 1960 and 2005, the obesity rate among American adults rose from 13% to 35%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).<sup>6</sup>
  - » 17% of children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 years are obese, according to the 2009–2010 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.<sup>7</sup>
  - » Physical inactivity costs an estimated \$177 billion per year in medical costs<sup>8</sup>, and accounts for 16% of all deaths in both men and women.<sup>9</sup>

## Walking as a Solution

- One of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Healthy People 2020 objectives is to encourage walking and cycling to get to work, school, and errands. This strategy helps build exercise into people's daily commute, since most people do not have time to exercise.<sup>10</sup>
- Walking is particularly important for elderly, disabled, and lower-income people who have fewer opportunities to participate in sports or formal exercise programs.<sup>11</sup>
- Walking and cycling can help reverse poor health trends:<sup>12</sup>
  - » Countries where walking and cycling are most common have the lowest obesity rates, whereas countries with the highest rates of car use for travel have the highest obesity rates (see Figure 2).<sup>13</sup>
  - » Each 0.62 mile walked per day is associated with a 5% decrease in likelihood of obesity.<sup>14</sup>
  - » Walking and cycling as part of everyday travel is as effective as structured workouts for improving health.<sup>15</sup>
- Walking infrastructure is cost-effective:
  - » In 2005, the CDC found that the annual per capita cost of building and maintaining multiuse trails was \$209 per person, whereas the per capita annual direct medical benefit of using the trail was \$564 per person. This equates to a 300% return on investment.<sup>16</sup>
- Walking to school is good for children's cognitive health and learning ability. It improves children's concentration, boosts moods and alertness, and enhances memory, creativity, and overall learning.<sup>17</sup>

1. United States Census. Americans Spend More Than 100 Hours Commuting to Work Each Year, Census Bureau Report. March 30, 2005.  
[http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american\\_community\\_survey\\_acs/cb05-ac02.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/cb05-ac02.html)

2. Frank L., Andersen M., Schmid T. Obesity relationships with community design, physical activity, and time spent in cars. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2004. 27(2):87–96.

3. Jackson, Dr. Richard; Sinclair, Stacy. *Designing Healthy Communities*. USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

4. American Psychological Association. *Sedentary Lives Can Be Deadly: Physical Inactivity Poses Greatest Health Risk*. 2009.  
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/08/090810024825.htm>

5. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. Fact Sheet for Professionals. 2008.  
<http://health.gov/paguidelines/factSheetProf.aspx>

6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Health, United States, 2011 with Special Feature on Socioeconomic Status and Health*. 2012.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/abus/abus11.pdf>

7. Ogden, Cynthia L.; et. al. Prevalence of Obesity in the United States, 2009–2010. *National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief*. No. 82. January 2012.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db82.pdf>

8. American Public Health Association. *Health Impact Assessment*. n.d.  
<http://www.apha.org/NR/rdonlyres/C2D5F8CB-206C-4F02-B692-42903F5CBE86/0/HIATranFACTshtfinalrevised510.pdf>

## Additional Resources

- American Public Health Association: <http://www.apha.org/transportation>
- American Heart Association: <http://www.startwalkingnow.org/>
- Every Body Walk: <http://everybodywalk.org/>
- Kaiser Permanente: <http://centerfortotalhealth.org/tag/george-halvorson/>
- Dr. Mike Evans: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUalnS6HIGo>
- National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity: <http://www.ncppa.org/>

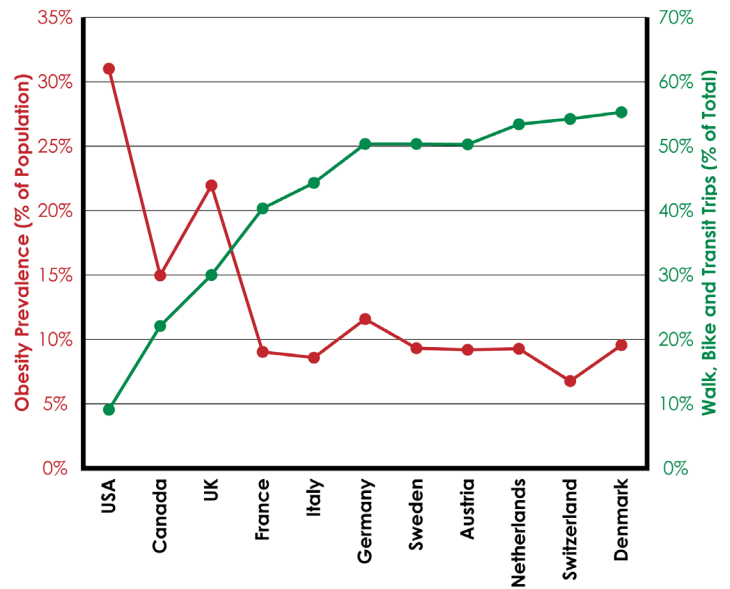


Figure 1: Transportation and Obesity Rates. Source: John Pucher, *Promoting Safe Walking and Cycling to Improve Public Health: Lessons from the Netherlands and Germany*, 2003 [http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthdesign/ppt-pdf/pucher\\_revised.pdf](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthdesign/ppt-pdf/pucher_revised.pdf)

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