

Health Benefits of "Active Transportation"

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Was one of your New Year's Resolutions to get in shape?
Are you looking for an easy way to improve your health?
Are you concerned that your child doesn't get enough exercise?

If so, there's a solution in your everyday life—walking and bicycling for transportation.

Health of a Nation

According to recent statistics, over 65% of American adults are overweight or obese, and less than 33% meet the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) recommended minimum amount of exercise (30 minutes, 5 days a week) [1]. For kids, about one out of three is overweight or obese, and only about one-third get the CDC's recommended minimum amount of exercise (60 minutes, 5 days a week) [2].

Dutchess County's 2008 Health Status Report shows that almost 56% of adults in the county are overweight or obese and over 23% live a sedentary lifestyle, meaning they have not exercised in the past month [3].

Most of us know that being overweight and not getting enough exercise is bad for our health. Nationwide, more than 200,000 deaths per year can be attributed to lack of physical activity, and obesity is estimated to cost the country \$68 billion each year in health care and personal costs [4]. Exercising not only helps you lose weight, it can also reduce your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, breast and colon cancer, diabetes, and improve your mental health [2].

How Can We Change Our Habits?

One simple way is to incorporate walking or bicycling into your daily routine.

"Run" errands without your car

Going to the drugstore? Post office? Library? Take a few extra minutes and walk or bike. It's more fun than driving, and you'll notice new things along the way. If you don't live near a village or town center, drive partway and walk from there, or park once and walk between destinations.

* Studies show that walking and cycling for transportation can reduce cardiovascular risk by 11%. Active transportation, independent of leisure-time exercise (like going to the gym), is associated with healthier cholesterol levels [5].

Walk to work

If you live within 2–3 miles of work, try walking. Walking two miles takes 30–40 minutes, so you’ll have done your minimum exercise for the day by the time you get to work. Wear sneakers and keep a pair of nicer shoes at the office. If you don’t want to walk both ways, try carpooling or take a bus one way. If you live too far, consider driving partway and walking the rest.

* People who walk or bicycle to work are significantly less likely to be overweight or obese [5].



Walk during lunch

Incorporating a walk into your lunch break is a great way to get some fresh air. Start a walking group with co-workers — you’ll keep each other honest and have more fun. If you don’t want to walk for the whole break, try walking for half. You can eat lunch after your walk or in smaller snacks during the day (which typically keeps you more alert than eating one large meal).

* Women who walk or bike 30+ minutes a day have a lower risk of breast cancer; 30–60 minutes of daily activity is associated with low blood pressure in women and low hypertension in both genders [5].

Bike to work

If you live within 15–20 miles of work, try bicycling. You can ride about 15 mph, or 7 miles in 30 minutes. Ask local cyclists what roads they recommend — you’ll want to choose your route carefully. Also, check if there is a safe place to store your bike at work.

* A 30-minute bike commute is associated with better mental health in men [5]. Three hours a week of cycling can cut your risk of heart disease and stroke by 50% [4].



Photo courtesy of Bikes Belong

Walk or bike to school

If you’re in school, or even taking a part-time class, try walking or biking — schools often have bicycle racks. Of course, skateboarding and rollerblading also count!

* Overweight kids who are active several times a week are 85% more likely to become normal-weight adults. Adolescents who walk or bike to school typically watch less television and are less likely to smoke than their peers who are driven to school [5].

Improve Your Health and Your Planet

You may wonder if pollution from passing cars outweighs the health benefits of active transportation, particularly in urban areas. Studies show that cyclists and walkers are actually exposed to less air pollution than drivers along the same route, even though cyclists and walkers are breathing more heavily [5]. Additionally, short car trips produce up to three times more pollution per mile than longer trips [4]. Making these trips by foot or bike not only improves your health, it also improves the health of the planet.

Research shows that “lifestyle” physical activity such as walking or biking to everyday destinations is just as effective as more structured “workouts” at improving health [5]. It also costs less than going to the gym, and since it’s incorporated into a daily routine, you’re more likely to keep it up! Finally, walking and cycling are low-impact and can be a fun way to spend time with friends and family.



Photo courtesy of Bikes Belong

Planning for Health

Communities with mixed land use, connected street systems, sidewalks, and centers with many destinations within walking distance support active transportation. Studies show that people living in more compact areas drive 25% less than people in sprawling areas, because they are able to walk and bike for many of their trips [6]. A University of Utah study found that on average, men living in walkable neighborhoods weighed ten pounds less than men living in less walkable neighborhoods; women weighed six pounds less if they lived in a walkable neighborhood [7]. Similarly, a Stanford University study of people trying to be more active found that in walkable neighborhoods, 67% of residents achieved their goals, while in less walkable neighborhoods only 30% of residents achieved their goals [8]. The development of walkable communities is one of the goals of Dutchess County’s Greenway Connections plan and a cornerstone of the Centers and Greenspaces concept.

So the next time you’re about to get in your car, consider, “Is this an opportunity to incorporate active transportation into my lifestyle?” Your body will thank you!

More Information

[CDC's Physical Activity Guidelines](#)

[Map My Walk](#)

[Map My Ride](#)

[Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center](#)

Join the [2009 Earth Day Commuter Challenge](#)

Sources

- ¹ National Center for Health Statistics, [2003-2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey \(NHANES\)](#); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General](#)
- ² [CDC Youth Online, Physical Activity](#) and [CDC Overweight and Obesity](#)
- ³ [Dutchess County Health Department 2008 Health Status Report](#)
- ⁴ [League of American Bicyclists](#): National Bike Month Organizer's Kit and Bike to Work Commuter's Booklet
- ⁵ [Bikes Belong Health Statistics](#)
- ⁶ Study by Ewing, Pendall, and Chen 2002-2003, cited in [Growing Cooler](#), Ewing et al, Urban Land Institute [5.4 MB]
- ⁷ [University of Utah study](#) cited in "This Old (Healthy) House", New York Times Blog, August 4, 2008
- ⁸ [Stanford University study summary article](#)

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