

HEALTH AND WELLNESS BENEFITS

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND THE AMERICAN HEALTH CRISIS

The evidence continues to mount that an emerging health crisis in the United States is related to physical inactivity.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a study in 2003 reporting that the rate of obesity in American adults had reached 20.9 percent, climbing from 19.8 percent in only a one-year period.¹
- A 2001 “call to action” by the Surgeon General highlighted an alarming trend: Overweight and obesity may soon cause as much preventable disease and death as cigarette smoking. Approximately 300,000 U.S. deaths a year currently are associated with obesity and overweight, and the total direct and indirect costs attributed to these conditions amounted to \$117 billion in the year 2000.²

Most Americans make the connection between exercise and health, but many people still lead sedentary lives. According to the Surgeon General’s “call to action,” less than one-third of Americans meet the federal recommendation of at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity at least five days a week, and 40 percent of adults engage in no leisure-time physical activity at all.³ Both the Surgeon General’s “call to action” and the CDC report emphasize the connection between exercise and health.

- In addition to helping control weight, physical activity helps prevent heart disease, helps control cholesterol levels and diabetes, slows bone loss associated with advancing age,

Trails, such as the towpath of the C & O Canal National Historic Park in Maryland, provide safe and enjoyable places for people of all ages to experience the outdoors. Photo by Karen Stewart.



WHAT ARE TRAILS AND GREENWAYS?

Greenways are corridors of protected open space managed for conservation and recreation purposes. Greenways often follow natural land or water features, and link nature reserves, parks, cultural features and historic sites with each other and with populated areas. Greenways can be publicly or privately owned, and some are the result of public/private partnerships. Trails are paths used for walking, bicycling, horseback riding and other forms of recreation or transportation. Some greenways include trails, while others do not. Some appeal to people, while others exist primarily as a habitat for wildlife. From the hills and plains of inland America to the beaches and barrier islands of the coast, greenways provide a vast network linking America’s special places.

“...THE PIEDMONT PORTION OF THE ASPHALT-PAVED TRAIL TOUCHED OFF A HEALTH REVIVAL SINCE IT OFFICIALLY OPENED LAST SEPTEMBER. SUDDENLY TOWNSPEOPLE CAN WALK, BIKE OR SKATE WITHOUT LOOKING OVER THEIR SHOULDER FOR MOTORIZED TRAFFIC.”

— ERIC LARSON SPEAKING OF THE CHIEF LADIGA TRAIL IN ALABAMA



Living next to the Allegheny Highlands Trail in Pennsylvania allows these nursing home residents a chance to get fresh air and a stroll on a beautiful day. Photo by Susan Doyle.

lowers the risk of certain cancers and helps reduce anxiety and depression.⁴ The power of physical activity to improve mood and prevent disabilities and chronic diseases is especially pronounced for older adults.⁵

- For people who are inactive, even small increases in physical activity can bring measurable health benefits.⁶ A 2000 study in Denmark found that leisure-time physical activity improves longevity across genders and age groups. Even moderate activity yielded benefits, with further positive effects derived from bicycling as transportation.⁷

HOW CAN TRAILS AND GREENWAYS HELP MAKE A HEALTHIER COMMUNITY?

Trails and greenways create healthy recreation and transportation opportunities by providing people of all ages with attractive, safe, accessible places to bike, walk, hike, jog, skate or ski. In doing so, they make it easier for people to engage in physical activity.

- Trails connect people with places, enabling them to walk or cycle to run errands or commute to work. A majority of the daily trips people make are short, providing an opportunity for physical activity that can be built in to the daily routine.
- Trails and greenways provide natural, scenic areas that cause people to actually want to be outside and physically active. Cities, such as Chattanooga, Tennessee and Providence, Rhode Island have transformed unsightly urban decay into inviting and popular greenways and walkways that make their communities more livable and walkable. Both cities promote their riverside greenways to attract visitors, businesses and residents.

- Trails connect neighborhoods and schools so children can cycle or walk to their friend's homes or to school, especially in communities that lack sidewalks. In Denver, the Weir Gulch Trail provides a safe neighborhood route for elementary-aged children, the trail's primary users.⁸
- In this age of expensive indoor gyms and health clubs, trails and greenways offer cost-effective places to exercise. Like gyms and health clubs, they also serve as a place where people can see and interact with other people exercising. Researchers have found that a lack of this type of social support is often a barrier to participation in exercise.⁹
- A North Carolina State University study conducted to gauge potential use of a trail in Cary, North Carolina, found that 72 percent of respondents indicated it was likely the trail would provide a place for them to exercise, and 57 percent said they likely would exercise more if the trail were created.¹⁰ Even if only half those respondents actually end up increasing their exercise because of the trail, the impact on public health is substantial.

CREATING HEALTHY HABITS BY BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Individuals must choose to exercise, but communities can make that choice easier. Lack of time or access to convenient outlets for healthy transportation and recreation opportunities are reasons commonly cited by all demographic groups as barriers to regular exercise. Communities can use trails and greenways as the tools to help make exercise more convenient and neighborhoods more exercise-friendly. By doing so, they can help change bad habits into healthy ones. Some of the steps communities can take to encourage physical activity and health are:



This woman in Florida finds the Jacksonville to Baldwin Trail helpful for combining exercise with running her errands. Photo by Boyd Loving.

- Use trails and greenways as tools to provide alternative transportation options. Connect neighborhoods and business districts so that people can walk or cycle to work and school, to complete errands or to visit friends and neighbors. This may help efforts to reduce road congestion and mitigate its polluting effects.
- Build trails and greenways through neighborhoods and along rivers and other natural landscapes to create attractive and accessible places to exercise.
- Connect parks and playgrounds with trails and greenways to create a network of recreational areas.
- Supplement public health promotion with concrete efforts to make more facilities like trails available and accessible. After completing a study of environmental and policy factors associated with physical activity, Dr. Ross Brownson of St. Louis University concluded, “There certainly is no shortage of health messages reminding people to be physically active. But this study suggests that changing communities by making them safer and offering people access to community parks, public recreation facilities, and walking and biking trails may help reduce the prevalence of overweight by promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles.”¹¹

With such evidence in hand, as well as poll numbers indicating strong support for the use of government funds to provide areas to engage in physical activity,¹² many communities are beginning dedicated programs to encourage physical activity, including advocating and creating trails and greenways. In addition, the federal government has made physical activity a research and promotion priority.

- In *Healthy People 2010*, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services set specific goals and objectives for increasing physical activity. These objectives call for substantial increases in the percentages of both adults and adolescents who get at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five days a week or more. They also call for walking to be the mode of choice for more than 25 percent of adult trips under one mile and 50 percent of trips to school under one mile. Among several other prescribed actions, the report recommends providing more facilities like trails to provide a space for activity to help reach these goals.¹³



The more rural Traction Line Recreational Trail in New Jersey and the urban Hudson River Greenway in New York are valuable assets to their community's health. Photos by Boyd Loving.

- The White House HealthierUS Initiative, launched in 2002, identifies four keys for a healthier America. The first of these is to “be physically active every day.” Toward this goal, the HealthierUS Initiative also highlights the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service, which works with community groups and local and state governments to develop trails and greenways.¹⁴
- The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services recently announced the creation of the Missouri Council on the Prevention and Management of Overweight and Obesity. The council aims to fill the need for a coordinated approach, including a focus on strategies and policies to improve environmental factors that determine physical activity, like the presence of trails.¹⁵
- The Rhode Island Prevention Coalition and the American Heart Association made Rhode Island the first state to start a Path to Health program. The program’s purpose is to encourage walking for health and enjoyment by establishing safe walking routes, which are marked with signs every half-mile and at every turn. The Coalition provides informational brochures about all existing paths, and hopes to install a Path to Health in each of the 39 communities in Rhode Island.¹⁶

TRAILS AND GREENWAYS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

With more health-focused initiatives in progress and more trails on the ground than ever before, the evidence is beginning to accumulate showing the extent of the positive impact trails and greenways have had on public health.

- In southeastern Missouri, 55 percent of trail users (who responded to the Bootheel and Ozark Health Projects survey) are exercising more now than before they had access to a trail.¹⁷

- Japanese researchers found that simply living in areas with walkable green spaces positively influenced the longevity of older citizens in large cities, independent of their age, gender, marital status, baseline functional status and socioeconomic status. Their report concludes that such public spaces should be further emphasized in planning for densely populated areas.¹⁸
- The Indiana Trails Study, which surveyed trail users on six different trails in Indiana, found that in all six locations, over 70 percent of trail users reported that they were getting more exercise as a direct result of the trail.¹⁹

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity
MS/K-24, 4770 Buford Highway NE, Atlanta GA
30341-3717

(770) 488-5820, www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa

Active Living by Design

A National Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health

400 Market Street, Suite 205, Chapel Hill, NC
27516

(919) 843-ALBD [2523]

info@activelivingbydesign.org

www.activelivingbydesign.org

ENDNOTES

- 1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Press Release, January 1, 2003.
- 2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, 2001.
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- 4 *Surgeon General's Call to Action*.
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- 7 Lars Bo Andersen, Peter Schnohr, Marianne Schroll and Hans Ole Hein, *Arch Intern Med.*, Vol. 160, pg. 1621–1628, 2000.
- 8 The Conservation Fund and Colorado State Parks State Trails Program, *The Effect of Greenways on Property Values and Public Safety*, March 1995.
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- 10 Mark I. Ivy and Roger L. Moore, "2000 Cary Greenway Neighbor Study: Assessing Landowner Attitudes Towards Proposed Greenway Trail Development," North Carolina State University, Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources, April 2, 2001.
- 11 Saint Louis University, School of Public Health, "New Study Finds Overweight Linked to Poor Community Environment," Press Release, March 5, 2003.
- 12 Environmental and Policy Determinants . . .
- 13 *Healthy People 2010*.
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- 15 Saint Louis University.
- 16 "Path to Health: History" and "Path to Health Routes in Rhode Island," www.pathtohealth.org/history.htm and www.pathtohealth.org/rimap.htm, accessed March 11, 2003.
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- 18 T. Takano, K. Nakamura and N. Watanabe, "Urban Residential Environments and Senior Citizens' Longevity in Megacity Areas: The Importance of Walkable Green Spaces," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, Vol. 56, pg. 913–918, 2002.
- 19 Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands, School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, Indiana University, *Indiana Trails Study: Summary Report*, November 30, 2001.



ABOUT THE CLEARINGHOUSE: A project of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the Trails and Greenways Clearinghouse provides technical assistance, information resources and referrals to trail and greenway advocates and developers across the nation. Services are available to individuals, government agencies, communities, grassroots organizations and anyone else who is seeking to create or manage trails and greenways.



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