

How to Step Out of Your Sedentary Lifestyle

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✓ Fact Checked

March 21, 2022

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › U.S. inactivity and sedentary lifestyles cause obesity and other health problems
- › Car-based lifestyles based on commuting from suburbs to job sites have greatly increased inactivity
- › Incorporating walking into personal lifestyles can lower blood pressure, reduce susceptibility to diabetes and lower the risk of developing some cancers and cognitive decline
- › Walkable communities and parks are making a comeback, often through the efforts of citizen activists
- › Many, including the elderly, have taken up mall walking; in some places children now walk to school via "walking school buses"

This article was previously published January 4, 2020, and has been updated with new information.

Most of us have some idea about the dangers of inactivity – the too common lifestyle that consists of going from the "couch to the car to the cube." But many think the alternative to a sedentary life is active working out and a gym membership.

The excellent documentary "The Walking Revolution," which grew out of the Kaiser Permanente Every Body WALK! campaign,¹ shows that the alternative to inactivity can be a simple, fun and free activity. It is called walking.

From "mall walking" to "walking school buses" made up of school children who walk to school as a group with a supervising adult, "The Walking Revolution" shows many ways you can incorporate walking into your everyday life. Implementing standing desks, which we use at Mercola.com, and using the stairs rather than the elevator are also great ways to combat a sedentary lifestyle.

"The Walking Revolution" also reveals health benefits of walking, some not that well-known. You may realize walking can lower your blood pressure and reduce your susceptibility to diabetes, but do you realize walking can also lower your risk of developing cancers and cognitive decline and that it can work as an "instant antidepressant," as experts say in the video?

In addition to benefits to your health, "The Walking Revolution" stresses the environmental benefits of walking. Pedestrian-designed environments like transit-oriented development (TOD), a type of urban development that situates housing within walking distance of public transportation, result in fewer cars and less pollution.

"Walk friendly" environments even help the local economy by enabling people to more easily visit stores that are not in malls and strip malls, says the film. Best of all, unlike some other forms of exercise, you can begin walking immediately with no particular training and do not need any special equipment.

How Did Americans Stop Walking?

When I grew up, children walked to school and were not typically driven by their parents. I still walk every day, usually barefoot, to receive the benefits of grounding along with the benefits of walking.

While fear of child-focused crime is a major reason parents say they began driving their children almost everywhere, and even though many children no longer live within walking distance of their school, the physical effects on children have been catastrophic.

In 2017-2018 obesity affected 13.7 million children and adolescents,² and children are developing what used to be thought of as "adult" diseases like Type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.³ Overall, 19.3% of children ages 2 to 19 years old were considered obese.⁴ After the pandemic began, though, that number jumped to 22.4% in August 2020.

U.S. inactivity and the obesity caused by sedentary lifestyles can be traced back 40 to 50 years as the U.S. highway system matured. That is when car culture and "bedroom communities" sprang up with breadwinners commuting to their jobs and returning to their suburban or exurban homes. Here is how Kaiser Permanente's "Every Body WALK!" describes the unfortunate evolution:⁵

"For the past 75 years, and in order to sell land, cars and a new concept of consumer-driven lifestyle, America's city planners favored the sprawl: Suburbia, individualized traffic, brand- new freeways and loose zoning laws won out over Main Street, USA – where people once lived, worked and shopped in relative proximity to their homes ...

While it took our communities less than a century to make that shift, what happened to our bodies after evolving for thousands of years as hunter - gatherer - transportation machines was severe ...

Raised in industrialized societies with little need to move and exercise, the human body is now paying a heavy price. Our natural bodies are mismatched to our constructed environment of comforts dooming us to live out our days in the golden cage of a sedentary lifestyle ...

Once upon a time our cities were designed on a human scale. As more and more people took to the roads, we moved into the suburbs. Sidewalks were removed. Drive-in mini-malls were created. Homes and business moved farther and farther apart. The Result: urban sprawl so expansive it could not be walked in a single day."

When they conceived their commuter-based environments, urban planners probably never realized that the ultimate "labor-saving device," the car, would produce negative health effects, pollution, urban sprawl and social isolation. As wealthier people fled to the suburbs, it also produced impoverished, crime-ridden inner cities too dangerous for safe outdoor exercise, says "The Walking Revolution."

The poor areas were also food deserts. What an irony that suburbanization, which was supposed to improve people's lifestyles, meant people could no longer walk in their neighborhoods. Wealthier people ended up walking indoors on treadmills and poorer people often ended up not walking at all.

Walkable Neighborhoods Are Making a Comeback

The good news, says "The Walking Revolution," is the U.S. is reversing the trend of urban sprawl including in neglected downtown areas across the nation. Some of the reversal, says the film, stems from millennials who are notorious for rejecting isolated suburban living and car culture.

In Chicago, the downtown campuses of Roosevelt, Loyola and DePaul universities and Columbia College have kept downtown housing, shopping, eateries and nightlife thriving.

Adding to the revival of walking communities, corporations have also relocated to urban centers in a move to attract the many employees who want short commutes to work instead of spending hours driving on the highway. In 2019, the trend was already taking off in Chicago, says Chicago Business:⁶

"McDonald's is one of many local companies that have left longtime headquarters campuses in suburbia or downstate for new locations in Chicago's expanding central business district. ADM, Kraft Heinz and Motorola Solutions have made the move, and snackmaker Mondelez plans to follow next year."

Others, notably including drugstore giant Walgreens – which is moving more than 1,000 workers from Deerfield to the Old Main Post Office – are setting up sizable downtown offices."

Another trend that shows the resurgence of walking is that public parks are coming back, often with citizen-led management, says "The Walking Revolution."⁷ The public park movement is likely to be as influential on public health as the availability of clean, piped water in cities and the creation of Central Park.

New and Old Walking Ideas

"The Walking Revolution" showcases many people, including older people, who have made "mall walking" their primary physical activity, with positive results. Certainly, the climate-controlled environment, free from traffic risks, can be ideal, although it means you're missing out on the benefits of outdoor exercise, like sunlight exposure and grounding.

Several people in the film testify, however, that they have mall-walked for years, lowering their blood pressure and beating their diabetes.⁸ It is also free, unlike a gym membership. The film also reminds us of the practically unlimited exercise opportunities that come from owning dogs. Not only do dogs need to go out several times each day, but they also want to play with us and other dogs.

They put a lift in our step, help us meet people and lift our spirits. We all know the benefits of exercise, says Preston, a young man in the video happily walking his dog, so, "Why not do it with a beautiful companion?"

Citizen-led park initiatives are addressing some of the barriers to walking, says the film. For example, traffic-calming devices, shade trees and better sidewalk lighting make walking a much more enjoyable activity.

"When there are trees between me and the roadway I feel safer," agrees one committed walker. Building walkable, safe paths should be as much a priority of city governments as building roads, says Neha Bhatt of Smart Growth America.

And speaking of roadways, the replacement of railroad-transported freight with truck lines has left many railway corridors abandoned, and they are easily transformed into walking paths. One shining example in the film is New York City's High Line, operated by Friends of the High Line in partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.⁹

Built on a retired elevated freight line, the High Line starts in the Lower West Side of Manhattan and runs all the way to the northern edge of the West Side Yard on 34th Street. Many people called for the abandoned freight tracks to be demolished because they were an eyesore but instead, in 2006, ground was broken on the first section of the High Line.¹⁰

Now dotted with art and food vendors, it has become an inspiration to all cities that want to transform their industrial infrastructure into walkable public spaces.

Many Medical Benefits of Walking

The medical risks from a sedentary lifestyle are significant. "The sedentary lifestyle is blamed for as many deaths as smoking," says one newscaster who begins the film. "Prolonged sitting is linked to breast cancer and colon cancer," says another.

Experts appearing in "The Walking Revolution" repeat the warnings. Inactivity is skyrocketing rates of "obesity, heart disease, high ... blood pressure, diabetes," says Shellie Y. Pfohl, from the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition. The diseases that threaten the public's health today are no longer infectious but "primarily rooted in inactivity," warns Dr. Robert E. Sallis, who practices both family and sports medicine.

Luckily, the effects of walking are just as eye-opening and include the reversal or diminishment of many sedentary-linked diseases, says the film. Jesus Lopez, an RN at Kaiser Permanente Fontana Medical Center, says walking helped him lose an astounding 70 pounds and that he feels like he has been "reborn."

Dr. Karim Khan, from the University of British Columbia, says activities like walking can "reduce some cancers by 50%." Dr. Lynn Kosteck-Csanyi of Kaiser Permanente Rehabilitation Center says dementia patients "are better in terms of their memory" when they walk.

John Arden, Ph.D., an author and psychologist, stresses the significant and underreported antidepressant benefits of walking. Compared to antidepressants, he says, "a better quick fix is walking," which he calls "an immediate antidepressant" that is the "cheapest and easiest way to get relief immediately."

Sallis adds that relying on pills instead of exercise to reduce health risks is no solution to health ills and can even be dangerous. Studies show, he says, that people who are put on blood pressure medication exercise less and don't eat as well as those who aren't on the pills. The reason is that they think they don't have to worry about their health problem anymore when they are on medication, says Sallis.

All told, says the video, the benefits of walking are unarguable and available to all. In fact, if the benefits that come from walking were available in a pill, those pills would be flying off the shelves, says Dr. JoAnn E. Manson, of Harvard Medical School.

Sources and References

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- ³ [University of California San Francisco Children's Hospital. 2019](#)
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- ⁶ [Chicago Business July 30, 2019](#)
- ¹⁰ [High Line 2009, History](#)