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URBAN PARKS: Encouraging Walking to Combat Obesity

Communities that are designed thoughtfully for walking increase the likelihood that residents will exercise more and become healthier.

Nearly 30 percent of all Texans are overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Among the causes of obesity are eating too much unhealthy food and not getting enough exercise.

Obesity increases a person's chances of having a stroke, heart disease, hypertension, and Type 2 diabetes. It also affects Texans economically: Nearly 10 percent of all medical expenses can be attributed to obesity. It pays to eat well and stay fit.

One way to combat obesity is for people to exercise more. How much physical activity is enough? The CDC recommends that adults should walk briskly for 150 minutes a week. This exercise should be augmented by muscle-strengthening activities 2 days a week.

One of the easiest ways for most people to exercise more is by walking. In fact, millions of Texans do just that. More than 80 percent of Texans said they walked for pleasure during 2008, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service's National Survey on Recreation and the Environment. Texans also bicycle (34 percent), take hikes (28 percent), and mountain bike (16 percent).

Walking is a leisure activity that people can do even as they grow older (Fig. 1). Unlike other forms of exercise, walking for pleasure is not reduced dramatically as people age.

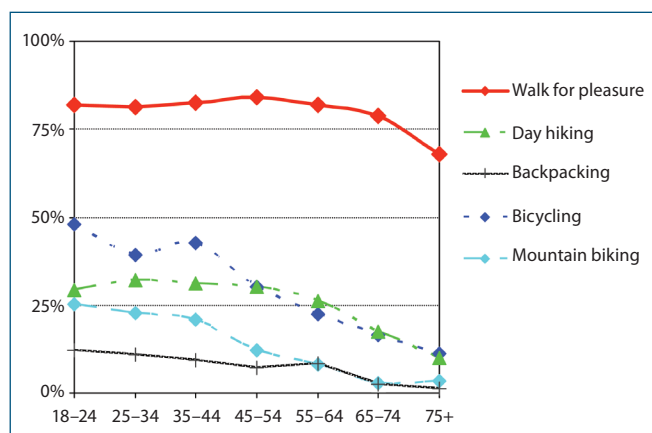


Figure 1: Rates of exercise across the life span.

Many people say they do not walk more often because they are too busy, they do not have a partner to walk with, and desirable walking routes are not accessible. To overcome these barriers, city park and recreation organizations can work with transportation planners to develop attractive, accessible walking routes along trails, sidewalks, and greenways.

What makes a walking route attractive and accessible? Results from several studies show that higher rates of walking are associated with the following social and environmental factors:

- Walking in a group:** People enjoy walking and exercising in the company of others. Walking programs can give residents opportunities to mix with like-minded individuals.
- Routes close to home:** People walk more minutes per week when parks, trails, and pathways

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are readily accessible. They are more likely to walk if these sites are near where they live and work.

- **Aesthetically interesting route:** Routes that appeal to all the senses encourage more walking. People are much more likely to take advantage of walking routes that feature plentiful trees, wildflowers, wildlife, water features, public art, and historic buildings and landmarks.
- **Connections to desirable sites:** People also make greater use of walking routes that are connected to nearby parks, schools, and stores. Some well-connected walking routes, such as the San Antonio River Walk, have become popular tourism destinations.
- **Buffers from traffic:** Walking is encouraged on routes that clearly separate pedestrians and traffic. Walking routes along city streets can be made more attractive by slowing vehicular traffic.
- **Safety:** Walking routes are more appealing if they are free of crime, litter, graffiti, and homeless people. People feel safe in public areas that are vibrant and well maintained.
- **Amenities:** People like trails and walking routes that include places to rest and escape the heat. Attractive walking routes feature drinking fountains, benches, and shade trees.

Using the guidelines above, park and recreation organizations can work with transportation and city planners to develop attractive walking routes. These routes can encourage increased exercise, which will help local residents physically as well as economically.

For more information

Contact Jamie Rae Walker, Extension Program Leader for Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at jrwalker@ag.tamu.edu for more information or assistance on making your community, parks, and trails more walkable.

Additional reading

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