Step It Up! The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities

Executive Summary

One out of every two U.S. adults is living with a chronic disease, such as heart disease, cancer, or diabetes. These diseases are major contributors to disability, premature death, and health care costs. Increasing people’s physical activity levels will significantly reduce their risk of chronic diseases and related risk factors. Because physical activity has numerous other health benefits—such as supporting positive mental health and healthy aging—it is one of the most important actions people can take to improve their overall health.

Step It Up! The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities recognizes the importance of physical activity for people of all ages and abilities. It calls on Americans to be more physically active through walking and calls on the nation to better support walking and walkability. Improving walkability means that communities are created or enhanced to make it safe and easy to walk and that pedestrian activity is encouraged for all people.

The purpose of the Call to Action is to increase walking across the United States by calling for improved access to safe and convenient places to walk and wheelchair roll and by creating a culture that supports these activities for people of all ages and abilities.

The Call to Action includes five strategic goals to promote walking and walkable communities in the United States:

- Make places where people live, learn, work, and play more walkable.
- Encourage residents to walk and wheelchair roll.
- Create a culture that supports walking among people of all ages and abilities.
- Improve surveillance, research, and evaluation gaps related to walking and walkability.
- Fill surveillance, research, and evaluation gaps related to walking and walkability.

Physical Activity: An Essential Ingredient for Health

Being physically active is one of the most important steps that people of all ages and abilities can take to improve their health. Increasing people’s physical activity level will significantly reduce their risk of chronic disease and premature death and support positive mental health and healthy aging.

Chronic Disease in the United States

Chronic diseases are the leading causes of death in the United States and major contributors to disability. In 2012, almost 50% of U.S. adults, or 117 million people, were living with a chronic disease, and of this group, about 60 million were living with two or more chronic diseases. Chronic diseases also ranked as four of the top five most costly medical conditions.

Benefits of Physical Activity

Physical activity can reduce illness from chronic diseases and premature death. Regular physical activity helps prevent risk factors for disease (such as high blood pressure and weight gain) and protects against multiple chronic diseases (such as heart disease, stroke, some cancers, type 2 diabetes, and depression). In children and adolescents, physical activity can improve bone health, cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness, and body composition.

People living with chronic disease also benefit from being physically active. For example, physical activity can lessen the severity of their condition, as well as prevent disease progression and premature death, help manage or reduce symptoms, and improve mobility. Among adults, physical activity is associated with improved quality of life, emotional well-being, and positive mental health. Regular physical activity is also important for healthy aging and may delay the onset of cognitive decline in older adults.

In children and adolescents, some evidence suggests that physical activity can lower levels of anxiety and depression. When schools encourage participation in physical activity as part of physical education, recess, classroom lessons, or extracurricular activities, students can also improve their academic performance.

Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans

To obtain substantial health benefits, the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommends that adults get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity, or an equivalent combination, each week and that children and adolescents be active for at least 60 minutes every day. People who are inactive and those who do not yet meet the guidelines are strongly encouraged to work toward this goal. Adults with disabilities who are unable to meet the guidelines should avoid inactivity and try to get regular physical activity according to their abilities.

Physical Activity in the United States

Despite the health benefits, only one-half of U.S. adults reported levels of physical activity consistent with the guideline for aerobic physical activity in 2013. Adults who were male, younger, white, or Asian or who had higher levels of education were more likely to have met the aerobic physical activity guideline.

Only 27% of high school students reported levels of physical activity that met the guideline for 60 minutes of physical activity a day in 2013. Male high school students and students in lower grade levels were more likely to meet the guideline.

Why Focus on Walking as a Public Health Strategy?
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http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calls/walking-and-walkable-co...
conditions.

Schools

Schools can provide opportunities for physical activity through physical education, recess, after-school activity programs, and physical activity breaks. Walking can be incorporated into these opportunities. Schools can encourage walking by promoting safe routes for students to walk to and from school. Opening school facilities, such as gyms, playgrounds, fields, and tracks, to the community during nonschool hours is a promising strategy to increase access to physical activity and recreational facilities and increase physical activity levels.

Colleges and Universities

Walkable campus strategies help students, faculty, and staff members adopt active living behaviors on campus. Colleges and universities can also educate and train future professionals to recognize their role in promoting walking and walkable communities. This training can be directed to students in health disciplines, as well as to students in other relevant fields, such as architecture, transportation, urban design, and business.

Worksites

Worksites can offer access to on-site facilities or employer-subsidized, off-site exercise facilities to encourage physical activity among employees. They can adopt policies that include brief activity breaks, flexible schedules, and walking meetings as potential strategies to increase participation in worksite physical activity. Incentives and social support programs can also be used to encourage employees’ interest and participation in physical activity programs.

Volunteer and Nonprofit Organizations

Volunteer and nonprofit groups can provide access to facilities, programs, and information to promote walking. For example, they can open their facilities and walking programs to the wider community for free or at low cost, or they can organize social support programs. These organizations can also serve as messengers to share information about the benefits of walking and walking programs and ways to improve walkability.

Health Care

Health care professionals can assess patients’ physical activity levels and educate patients across their lifespan about the importance of physical activity. Counseling may be especially important for adults who are at higher risk of chronic disease, such as those who are overweight or obese and have additional risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Walking is an especially good activity for health care professionals to promote because most of their patients can walk, and walking can be easily modified to a person’s abilities.

Media

The media can be effective in influencing attitudes and changing behaviors, including health behaviors. Media campaigns can be part of effective multicomponent interventions designed to increase physical activity. However, evidence on the effectiveness of stand-alone mass media campaigns to increase physical activity at the population level is inconsistent.

Public Health

Public health professionals can conduct research and evaluate programs to determine what works to promote and sustain physical activity, including walking. They can summarize findings about what community approaches work to increase walking and walkability, and they can help other sectors design and implement interventions. They can convene partners across multiple sectors to learn from each other and to develop strategic action plans that efficiently use each partner’s expertise and resources. Public health professionals also collect data about walking and walkability to measure and monitor changes over time.

Gaps in Surveillance, Research, and Evaluation

Existing research provides an evidence base about what works to increase walking in the United States. However, additional surveillance, research, and evaluation work is needed to maximize the success of community approaches and address disparities in walking and walkability.

Surveillance

Walking among adults is assessed through self-report in several surveillance systems, but not in a consistent manner. Surveillance systems that assess walking among children and adolescents mainly collect data on walking for transportation. Improvements to existing surveillance systems are needed to establish standard and valid measures of walking that can be used across systems at national, state, regional, and local levels.

No national surveillance system routinely and comprehensively monitors local neighborhood features of a walkable community. Brief survey and on-the-ground audit tools or technological approaches that capture the most important aspects of walkability are needed to increase the feasibility of routinely assessing key features of the environment as part of core questions in surveillance systems.

Research

Existing research demonstrates that broadly defined or multicomponent interventions increase physical activity, but it is rarely known which set of individual elements are most effective, necessary, or sufficient to achieve a positive effect while minimizing any negative effects, such as injuries. Effective communication can also be an important component of physical activity programs. However, researchers are not sure which specific messages or combination of messages and other intervention components, such as walking programs and access to places to walk, are best for populations that vary in age, location, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Evaluation

Communities across the country are implementing a variety of interventions that promote walking, but many of these interventions are not being adequately evaluated. Evaluation planning should occur early in the development process to identify key stakeholder questions and ensure that adequate resources are allocated to the evaluation. Evaluation data would be strengthened by the use of common metrics across studies to allow comparison of the relative cost and effectiveness of various interventions.

Economic Analysis

Additional research is needed to fully describe the economic benefits of adequate levels of physical activity in the United States. Research and evaluation studies should collect data to support economic analysis. In addition, to fully capture the range of costs and savings from changes in environmental design or program implementation, economic analyses may need to consider other potentially quantifiable savings that result from these types of interventions.

The Call to Action

The Call to Action includes five goals, with related strategies to support walking and walkability in the United States. These strategies will make it easier and safer for people to walk and to use a wheelchair, ride a bike, and be active in other ways. Support for these goals and strategies is needed across many sectors of society, such as transportation, land use, and community design; parks, recreation, and fitness; education; business and industry; volunteer and nonprofit; health care; media; and public health. Families and individuals will also need to be involved to make the United States a walkable nation.
Goal 1. Make Walking a National Priority

- Encourage people to promote walking and make their communities more walkable.
- Create a walking movement to make walking and walkability a national priority.

Goal 2. Design Communities that Make It Safe and Easy to Walk for People of All Ages and Abilities

- Design and maintain streets and sidewalks so that walking is safe and easy.
- Design communities that support safe and easy places for people to walk.

Goal 3. Promote Programs and Policies to Support Walking Where People Live, Learn, Work, and Play

- Promote programs and policies that make it easy for students to walk before, during, and after school.
- Promote worksite programs and policies that support walking and walkability.
- Promote community programs and policies that make it safe and easy for residents to walk.

Goal 4. Provide Information to Encourage Walking and Improve Walkability

- Educate people about the benefits of safe walking and places to walk.
- Develop effective and consistent messages and engage the media to promote walking and walkability.
- Educate relevant professionals on how to promote walking and walkability through their profession.

Goal 5. Fill Surveillance, Research, and Evaluation Gaps Related to Walking and Walkability

- Improve the quality and consistency of surveillance data collected about walking and walkability.
- Address research gaps to promote walking and walkability.
- Evaluate community interventions to promote walking and walkability.

Conclusion

Promoting walking offers a powerful public health strategy to increase physical activity. With the Call to Action, the U.S. Surgeon General calls on Americans to be physically active and for the nation to better support walking and walkability for people of all ages and abilities. To improve walking and walkability, communities need to be designed to make walking safer and easier; programs and policies need to be available to support and encourage walking; and individuals and families need to support each other to become and stay active. Many partners are already involved, but more engagement is needed to increase the reach, breadth, and impact of these efforts. Walking is an easy and inexpensive way to improve the health and well-being of all Americans. Now is the time to step it up and make walking a national priority.

References