
ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

Background

The major diseases affecting the quality and quantity of life of Canadians, which include obesity, diabetes, coronary artery disease, depression and cancer, are all linked to physical inactivity. In Canada, 77% of women and 74% of men in Canada are considered physically inactive.⁽¹⁾ The cost of this inactivity and obesity was estimated at \$4.3 billion in 2001.⁽²⁾ A 10% increase in physical activity could potentially reduce direct health care expenditures by \$150 million a year. This does not include indirect costs such as lost productivity due to illness, premature death or a range of other factors, including mental illness and poor quality of life.⁽³⁾

Thus far, efforts to increase physical activity by changing the behaviour of individuals have

had limited success. One reason is that many people have difficulty sustaining behaviours that involve additional time commitments. That is one reason for the increasing emphasis being placed on active transportation, which is any human-powered form of transportation, such as walking and cycling.

Walking and cycling can be efficient alternatives to automobile travel. Cycling is usually the fastest mode of travel door to door for distances under five km, and for up to 10 km in city cores. Walking is simpler and nearly as fast for distances up to two km. When travel times are similar for active and motorized transportation, physical activity is gained with no net time lost, and at much lower cost. The cost of operating a motor vehicle is typically \$10,000 per year, ⁽⁴⁾ while operating costs for a bicycle are much lower.

Communities that have sidewalks, enjoyable scenery, street lights and nearby stores have improved levels of active transportation and physical activity. However, in recent decades

1 Tremblay MS, Katzmarzyk PT, Willms JD. Temporal trends in overweight and obesity in Canada, 1981-1996. *Int J Obes Relat Metab Disord* 2002;26(4):538-43.

2 Katzmarzyk PT, Janssen I. The economic costs associated with physical inactivity and obesity in Canada: an update. *Can J App Phys* 2004;29(1):104.

3 Katzmarzyk PT, Gledhill N, Shephard RJ. The economic burden of physical inactivity in Canada. *CMAJ* 2000;163(11): 1435-40.

4 Canadian Automobile Association. *Driving Costs: 2005 Edition*. Available: www.carpool.ca/pdf/CAA-driving-costs-05.pdf (accessed 2007 Feb. 2).

communities have often been designed around the automobile. Street design, parking space, sidewalks and distance to retail destinations have all been planned assuming motorized transportation, and this often makes it difficult to move around communities by walking or cycling.

Although individual decision-making remains important in any strategy for increasing active transportation, there is an essential role for communities and governments to play. Major improvements in the health of Canadians in the past 200 years have been due to improved sanitation, access to clean water and injury prevention. The role of individual decision-making in effecting these changes is dwarfed by the impact of the public health measures and infrastructure involved. Just as potable tap water is a health issue, so are decisions about land use, transportation policy and infrastructure.

Community design is a major determinant of whether people use active transportation, whether they are physically active and whether they are obese. Canadians need communities that make it easy to be physically active in their daily living.

Communities can create an environment in which the physically active choice is the easy choice. They can do this via sidewalks, trails, bicycle lanes and bicycle paths, and by providing pedestrian-friendly intersections, parks and green spaces, and safe bicycle parking spaces. They can also arrange zoning so that retail destinations are within walking or cycling distance of residential areas. This process also includes dedicating a sufficient portion of their street maintenance budget (including snow clearing) to maintaining active transportation routes as well as routes for motorized vehicles. It may include redesigning intersections, giving up vehicle

lanes or parking spaces, or increasing the price of parking.

Additional benefits to designing communities for pedestrians and cyclists.

- a stronger sense of community with greater civic involvement by citizens
- increased property values and retail activity
- less noise pollution
- lower crime rates
- less smog and other air pollution
- less greenhouse gas production
- decreased risk of injury to pedestrians and cyclists
- decreased costs of roadway and parking construction.

A role for everyone

Other sectors can support communities in making active transportation choices easy choices:

- Businesses can create a work environment friendly to active transportation, including a corporate culture friendly to physical activity. They can incorporate active transportation planning into building design and create an environment friendly to physical activity. These steps could include making bicycle parking, showers and lockers available, and providing stairs that are pleasant and easier to access than elevators. They can also incorporate a culture of physical activity in decisions about where and how to hold meetings, and what people are allowed to wear to work.
- School boards can develop policies to promote active transportation to and from school. These include building

and maintaining secure bicycle parking, ensuring safe walking routes within communities, and assisting parents in walking their children to school.

- Citizens can use active transportation themselves and treat with respect those who are already making active transportation choices. They can also lobby governments to make their community safer and easier places for cycling and walking.
- Physicians can encourage patients to use active transportation as a way to boost their physical activity levels and improving their health. They can also lead by example and use active transportation themselves.

of active transportation in their communities.

- Require public health impact assessments for all land-use and transportation decisions, including the impact on the chemical environment and on physical activity.
- Assess the impact that changes in the “built” environment can have on public health, and which interventions are most safe and effective.

Recommendations

The CMA recommends that all sectors (government, business and the public) work together, as a matter of priority, to create a culture in their communities that supports and encourages active transportation.

The CMA urges governments to:

- Commit to long-term plans for active transportation networks that are in keeping with these goals and that include specific benchmarks to measure progress.
- Require that active transportation be part of all infrastructure renewal projects, with investment in active transportation vs. motorized transportation in proportion to targeted active transportation use. (Some cities have achieved active transportation rates of up to 15%.)
- Develop an awareness campaign to help Canadians to recognize the value