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# More dense, populated neighborhoods inspire people to walk more

👤 By Sara Zaske, WSU News & Media Relations



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SPOKANE, Wash. — Adding strong evidence in support of “walkable” neighborhoods, a large national study found that the built environment can indeed increase how much people walk.

The study, published in the [American Journal of Epidemiology](#), showed a strong connection between place and activity by studying about 11,000 twins, which helps control for family influences and genetic factors. The researchers found that each

1% increase in an area's "walkability" resulted in 0.42% increase in neighborhood walking. When scaled up, that means a 55% increase in the walkability of the surrounding neighborhood would result in about 23% more walking — or about 19 minutes a week for every resident living in that area.

In terms of public health, that can add up to a big difference for the highly sedentary U.S. populace, according to study lead author Glen Duncan, a Washington State University nutrition and exercise physiology professor.

"We have so many people in the U.S. population who don't get sufficient activity. If we could shift the percentage of the population that just took on more plain old walking, we would see real health benefits," said Duncan, who is also the director of the Washington State Twin Registry.

For the study, neighborhoods were deemed walkable based on an index that assesses the density of people, roads and desirable places to walk to, such as stores, parks, restaurants and coffee shops. The twin pairs in the study lived in all parts of the U.S., but the more walkable neighborhoods were typically found in urban areas.

*Walkable neighborhoods include stores, parks and restaurants as well as access to public transportation. On the other side, more suburban or rural areas tend to be less walkable as they require driving to access things like grocery stores or other amenities.*

Seattle's Capitol Hill area is a good example of a walkable neighborhood, Duncan said, given its profusion of shops and restaurants, as well as access to public transportation such as buses and a light rail station. On the other side, more suburban or rural areas tend to be less walkable as they require driving to access things like grocery stores or other amenities.

The study analyzed data from surveys of 5,477 pairs of twins taken from 2009 to 2020 which included information about where they lived and number of minutes walked in a typical week, whether for recreation, exercise or simply to get from one place to the other. The analysis revealed that those who lived in areas considered more walkable actually did walk more.

The researchers also looked at whether an area's walkability increased transit use, but few study participants used public transit. However, living in a walkable neighborhood reduced the chance of having no transit use at all by 32%.

Living in a walkable area didn't appear to have an effect on more vigorous exercise, but the authors note that this kind of exercise, which includes running and lifting weights, isn't limited to the neighborhood environment. For example, a person could go for a vigorous bike ride that would take them well outside the boundaries of their neighborhood.

Regardless, Duncan emphasized that walking is a great and easy way to improve health. It also counts toward the widely recommended 150 minutes a week of physical activity.

"You don't have to spend loads of money on fitness clothing and the best gear. Walking is a very natural thing. You just lace on some shoes and head out the door," he said.

In addition to Duncan, co-authors on this study include researchers from the University of Washington, University of Southern

California, University of Virginia, Columbia University and WSU.

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