

Fact Sheet

Active Transport



VicHealth

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Active transport is physical activity undertaken as a means of transport, not purely as a form of recreation.

- According to a 2001 survey of people who travelled to work, 81.4% went by car, 7% used public transport, 3.8% walked, 1.1% cycled, 4% used multiple modes and 2.8% used an 'other' mode.¹
- Car usage is escalating rapidly with 50% of Victorian households now owning two or more cars.¹
- Active transport provides multiple health benefits by providing physical activity and decreasing the adverse health effects of motor vehicle transport.
- 80% of 10 year olds in Germany are allowed to travel alone to places other than school; in Australasia only 40% are allowed.²
- 72.3% of children in grades 3–6 are driven to school; 61% of these children said they would prefer to walk to school if given the choice.³
- Travelling to work by car can expose you to more air pollution than if you travelled by train, bus, bicycle or walked.⁴

What is active transport?

Active transport is defined as physical activity undertaken as a means of transport and not purely as a form of recreation. Active transport generally refers to walking and cycling for travel to and/or from a destination, but may also include other activities such as the incidental activity associated with the use of public transport.⁵

What do we know?

Transport is a significant activity in most people's everyday lives and can be a major determinant of health both directly and indirectly.⁶ The link between transport, health and the environment has become more apparent over the last few decades for a number of significant reasons:

- Car usage has risen dramatically with more trips being made in the car and less being made on foot, bikes and public transport. This is mainly due to time-poor people seeing the car as a more convenient way of juggling busy lives full of school drop-offs and pick-ups and work commitments.
- Cycling is not seen as an attractive option to driving due to lack of end-of-ride facilities in workplaces and schools and unsafe road infrastructure.
- In the last 20 years the proportion of Australian adults who are overweight, obese or inactive has increased in parallel with our greater reliance on cars.
- There is recognition of motor transport's contribution to global warming, air and noise pollution and the accumulative effects of these factors on our physical and mental health.⁷
- Studies have shown that children living near roads with heavy traffic are 50% more likely to suffer from respiratory disease.⁸
- Regular exposure to traffic congestion impairs health, psychological adjustment, work performance and overall satisfaction with life.⁸

VicHealth

15-31 Pelham St, Carlton 3053
PO Box 154, Carlton Sth 3053
Ph. +61 3 9667 1333
Fax. +61 3 9667 1375
Email. vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au



- Increased car usage has resulted in urban sprawl, with more people moving to suburban areas that are planned around the car. This has resulted in neighbourhoods that do not encourage social interaction and that are planned around large shopping centres rather than community hubs.⁸

How can active transport help?

Choosing to walk or cycle as a form of transport offers two important benefits. Noise, air pollution and stress decrease, while the health benefits from regular physical activity increase. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of developing coronary heart disease, obesity, adult onset diabetes, depression and anxiety.⁹

Walking and cycling are seen as forms of physical activity that are most accessible to the majority of the population regardless of income, age and location. It is estimated that over 96% of people can walk and over 75% can ride a bicycle.¹⁰ Brisk walking for 30 minutes a day is recommended as enough exercise to provide significant health benefits.¹¹ Active transport activities during childhood, such as walking or riding to school, can help develop healthy habits that are carried through to adulthood.

Children participating in a walking school bus program, for example, not only report an increase in physical activity; they also improve their road safety skills, get to know more people in their neighbourhood, and feel a greater sense of belonging at school and in their community.³

Using public transport instead of driving can have positive health spin-offs. Walking or cycling 1km to the railway station instead of driving saves 0.2-0.3kg greenhouse gas emissions, other air pollutants and fuel costs. By walking to the railway station and climbing the steps, a person would meet one-third to one-half of their daily requirements for physical activity.⁷

A study conducted in Sydney found that people who travelled to work by car were exposed to at least twice the amount of air pollutants such as benzene than those who travelled by train, bus, bicycle or walked.⁴

References

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