

The benefits of walking

A research summary

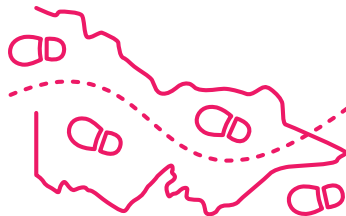
This research summary draws on the latest data on the benefits of walking for physical health, and mental and social wellbeing; as well as for the economy and environment. This summary is intended for people working in local government and community health organisations to support policy and planning. This may include preparing submissions to increase investment in walking, active travel and/or developing walkable neighbourhoods.

Why walk?

Walking is the most popular recreational activity in Victoria and Australia



1 in 6 trips in Victoria are on foot



Walking delivers health, social, environmental and economic benefits to communities



Walking can help children get the recommended **60 minutes of physical activity** a day they need to stay healthy



Walking is accessible to most people, regardless of socioeconomic status

Over a million Victorians walk each year for recreation, making it the most popular recreational activity in Victoria.

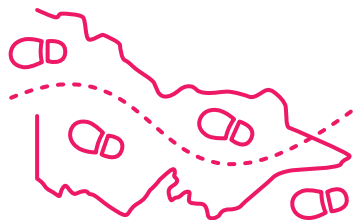
Walking is both functional and recreational. In Victoria, one in six weekday trips is made on foot, and walking accounts for 2.36 million weekday trips compared to 1.61 million trips on public transport.

Walking provides a range of health and social benefits. Just 30 minutes of walking per day can alleviate a range of health concerns and costs associated with inactivity, obesity and chronic disease.

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AN INACTIVE NATION

Australians are increasingly falling short of meeting physical activity guidelines. Just over half the adult population is considered insufficiently active for good health. Alarming, this problem extends to our children and young people. Only 30 per cent of 2 to 17 year-olds meet the World Health Organization's (WHO) physical activity recommendation for health of at least 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily.

Physical inactivity has been identified as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality, causing an estimated 3.2 million deaths. In economic terms, physical inactivity costs the Australian economy \$13.8 billion, including healthcare, productivity and mortality costs.

The burden of physical inactivity is 1.7 times higher for people from low socioeconomic groups than those in the highest socioeconomic group.

Our lack of physical activity is associated with an increase in the number of Australians who are overweight. Currently, almost 2 in 3 Australians are either overweight or obese, and those levels are expected to rise.

Obesity and weight problems are estimated to cost the Australian economy \$56.6 billion annually.

WHO recommends 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic physical activity a week for adults. Walking for 30 minutes each day is a good way to meet these guidelines. An active lifestyle is critical to reducing the global burden of inactivity, obesity and chronic disease.

Health and social benefits of walking

Disease and weight management

Walking helps with weight management, with studies showing that walking three kilometres thrice weekly can reduce weight by half a kilo over three weeks.

Excess weight is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal conditions and some cancers.

If Australians increased physical activity by just 10 per cent through walking, this would result in 6,000 fewer incidents of disease and 2000 fewer deaths.

In economic terms, we would gain 114,000 working days and reduce healthcare costs by \$96 million per year.

Mental wellbeing

Walking has been clearly linked with a range of mental health benefits. In contrast, car dependency (relying on a car for transport) has been linked with feelings of isolation, which is a major risk factor for depression.

Physically active
people have up
to **30% reduced**
risk of becoming
depressed



A UK study, for example, showed that physically active people have up to a 30 per cent reduced risk of becoming depressed. Other studies have shown that regular walking can reduce both anxiety and depression.

Walking has been linked to improvements in happiness, self-esteem, mood and sleep quality.

Independence and improved health for the elderly

Almost half a million Victorians aged 55 and over walk for recreation and sport. Elderly people are more likely to walk than any other form of exercise.

Australia is an ageing population. This trend will increase the demand for health services, and associated costs. Walking can reduce the demand on health services. Cardiovascular exercise improves endurance and reduces breathlessness and fatigue in the elderly. Regular walking can halve the number of people over 45 who fracture their hip. It can also prevent common conditions like osteoarthritis and osteoporosis.

As a low-impact activity, walking is an accessible form of exercise for those with mobility issues.

Walking also exposes older people to opportunities for socialisation, and may encourage personal mobility and independence.

Walking is a critical element of leading a healthy, independent and social life.

Confidence and independence for children

Our cities and communities should also support independent mobility for children. Ideally, children need a walkable environment where they are able to gain confidence and learn the skills required for independent travel.

17%
of Victorian
school students
walk to school
in a week



Children who regularly walk to school are more fit and active, and these trips to and from school help meet their recommended target of 60 minutes of exercise a day. Walking also helps children to get to know their local community and meet and play with other children in their neighbourhood, increasing their social confidence and independence.

Walking can help children get the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity a day they need to stay healthy



Walking and physical activity is particularly important for children with additional needs. This includes children with ADHD, with research finding that a walk in the park can be as beneficial as some of the most popular medication options.

Social connection

A walkable environment can help foster a sense of social connection and community within cities and neighbourhoods. People who walk are more likely to engage in conversation and develop friendships – particularly when car dependency is decreased.

One study found that people living in areas with only 2,000 vehicles in use per day were three times more likely to have more friends than those living in areas with 16,000 vehicles in use per day.

Closing the gap on social disadvantage

Walking is the only form of exercise that is accessible to most people across the socioeconomic spectrum. Many people who are economically or socially disadvantaged rely on walking. Investment in safe and convenient walking options (such as well-lit, reinforced footpaths) is critical for those who most need it.

People who are economically disadvantaged are often forced to live in outer suburbs and/or low-density housing areas. Because of a lack of local infrastructure and transport options in these areas, many residents are dependent on cars, resulting in less time and opportunity for physical activity and incidental exercise, such as walking to public transport.

Being car-dependent can also increase economic inequity. Car-dependent households spend 50 per cent more on transport than households who can access and use multiple forms of transport.

Giving marginalised populations equitable access to infrastructure and walking opportunities provides an economic benefit to individuals and the whole community. The city of Portland (USA) has saved \$1 billion because its residents drive 20 per cent less than the rest of the nation.

Increased exercise opportunities for women

Walking is a very popular form of exercise for women. More than 55 per cent of women participate in walking on a weekly basis, compared to 47 per cent of men. This difference is even more obvious for people aged 18–54. Women in this age group are twice as likely as men to participate in recreational walking.



Women aged 18–54 are twice as likely as men to take part in non-sport physical activities such as walking

Nonetheless, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Better Life index, Australia has the worst gender inequality rating for feelings of safety when walking home alone at night—63 per cent of women don't feel safe walking home at night compared to just 27 per cent of men.

When women feel unsafe walking alone at night, their opportunities for physical activity decrease. One UK study showed that when people feel safe walking at night, their likelihood of walking at least five times a week increases by 70 per cent.

Improved perceptions of safety

Communities that provide walkable environments increase the perceived and actual safety for their residents. For example, having a high number of people on the streets or in walkways increases people's perception of safety and confidence, particularly after dark.

Investing in walkable communities also has benefits when it comes to pedestrian injuries and fatalities. In New York City, the introduction of 'traffic calming' measures such as improved signage, reduced injuries to pedestrians by 67 per cent.

Environmental and economic benefits of walking

Environmental

With the world confronted by a global climate change crisis, walking offers many benefits to the environment.

In Australia, transportation contributes 16 per cent of Australia's total emissions. Substituting walking for shorter car trips would reduce the consumption of fossil fuels and vehicle emissions and would also improve air quality. Currently with 1 billion people globally exposed to air pollution each year.

Economic development

If people in Melbourne and Geelong substituted 50 per cent of short, private vehicle trips (trips under 1 km) for walking, this would result in 2.4 million more walking trips each week and \$165 million in savings to the economy (associated with decongestion, health, vehicle operating costs, infrastructure savings and environmental benefits).

This is true also of trips to work. Each person who walks 20 minutes to work and back provides \$8.48 to the economy in benefits.

Getting people off the road also saves the economy by reducing traffic congestion. Currently, time spent in traffic costs the Australian economy nearly \$16.5 billion in travel delay costs. This figure is expected to rise to \$10.2 billion in Melbourne alone by 2030.

Investment in walking infrastructure produces higher returns than rail or road. Studies show that every \$1 spent on walking interventions, such as improving the quality of pedestrian experience, leads to a benefit of \$13.

Walking interventions also improve local trading. Walkable environments encourage people to go into shops, increasing trading by up to 40 per cent and rents by 20 per cent. Increased retail spending also improves land value. The introduction of pedestrian plazas in New York City increased sales by 172 per cent.

Areas with high levels of pedestrian activity also tend to have higher perceived safety and accessibility, which in turn generates economic return. One study found that investment in a walkable environment can increase annual office rents by US \$9/A\$13 per square foot, retail rents by US\$7/A\$10 per square foot and home rents by US\$82/A\$119 per square foot.

OBESITY

Almost two in three Australians are either overweight or obese, with those levels expected to rise.

Obesity and weight problems are estimated to cost \$56.6 billion annually.

Obesity can reduce life expectancy by an average of three years. Excess weight is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal conditions and some cancers.

BURDEN OF DISEASE

Physical inactivity is the fourth-leading risk factor for mortality globally. Australians of all ages can benefit from walking more.

If Australians walked for 15 minutes per day, 5 days a week, the disease burden from physical inactivity would be reduced by approximately 13 per cent. If we all walked for 30 minutes per day, the burden would be reduced by 26 per cent.

LOWER SES GROUPS

The burden of physical inactivity is 1.7 times higher for those from low socioeconomic groups than those in the highest socioeconomic group.

For further information, please refer to:

VicHealth's Physical Activity Strategy 2019–2023

A Healthier Start for Victorians – A consensus statement on obesity prevention

Acknowledgement

VicHealth acknowledges that this summary has been derived from the report, *The economic case for investment in walking*, written by ARUP for Victoria Walks.

Authors

The report was written by Yostina Badawi, Dr Francesca Maclean and Ben Mason, ARUP, November 2018.

Suggested citation

The benefits of walking: A research summary, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, Australia, 2019.



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VicHealth acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

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September 2019 P-PA-795

