



# STEP IT UP!

A Partners Guide to  
Promote Walking and  
Walkable Communities





# Letter from the Surgeon General

Physical activity is one of the most important things Americans can do to improve their health, and walking is an easy way to get moving.

Walking helps people stay both physically and mentally healthy. It brings business districts to life and can help reduce air pollution.

However, there are barriers to choosing even this simple form of physical activity. Many of us live in neighborhoods that can present barriers to walking. Important places, such as shops, schools, parks, or senior centers, may not be near enough to reach by walking; there may be no sidewalks; or there may be concerns about safety. Lack of time can be a barrier, as can health problems.

*Step It Up! The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities* calls on us to increase walking by working together to increase access to safe and convenient places to walk and wheelchair roll and to create a culture that supports walking for Americans of all ages and abilities.

We all have a role to play in making walking easier. Individuals can start a clean-up effort to make their neighborhoods more attractive or participate in local planning processes. Universities can build walkable campuses. Community designers can plan safe and fun places to walk. Health care professionals can help patients to overcome individual barriers to walking regularly. Countless people in these and other sectors are already working to promote walking. We greatly appreciate their efforts and the strides that have been made so far, but more engagement is needed to increase the reach, breadth, and impact of these efforts.

This booklet describes the benefits of walking, explains some of the barriers, and offers ideas on how you and the organizations you are involved with can help make walking more accessible to all Americans. It also includes success stories from communities that are already making a difference.

Promoting walking and walkable communities is a top priority, and I look forward to working with you to shape a more active and healthier nation.

It's time to step it up, America! The journey to better health begins with a single step.

Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., M.B.A.  
19th U.S. Surgeon General



# Being Physically Active Is Important to Good Health

Being physically active has many benefits. It is one of the most important things Americans can do to improve their health.

Regular physical activity can reduce the burden of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers, and can prevent early death. Physical activity can also help people with chronic diseases manage their conditions. Chronic diseases are the leading causes of death in the United States. Almost 50% of U.S. adults, or 117 million people, are living with a chronic disease, and among these, about 60 million are living with two or more chronic diseases.

Physical activity has other health benefits, too. It can help manage weight and prevent falls. Physical activity can even reduce depression and may improve cognitive abilities.

Any amount of physical activity is beneficial. Ideally, though, adults should do at least 2½ hours of moderate-intensity physical activity (like walking), 1 hour and 15 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity, or a combination each week. Children and adolescents should do at least 1 hour of physical activity every day, and it should include mostly aerobic activity and some muscle- and bone-strengthening activities. Despite the health benefits, only half of American adults and about a quarter of American high school students get the recommended amount of aerobic physical activity.





## Why Walking?

Walking and wheelchair rolling are great ways for people to increase their physical activity. Walking is a powerful public health strategy for the following reasons:

- Walking is an easy way to start and maintain a physically active lifestyle.
- Walking does not require special skills, facilities, or expensive equipment.
- Walking is a year-round activity that can be done indoors or outdoors.
- Walking can be done by people of all ages and abilities.
- Many people with disabilities are able to walk or move with assistive devices, such as wheelchairs or walkers.

• Walking is the most common form of physical activity for people across the country.

• Walking can serve many purposes:

- Catching up with friends and family
- Getting to school, work, or a nearby store
- Exercise

# How Can We Make Communities More Walkable?



Individuals have to make the decision to walk. However, the decision can be made easier by improvements to community walkability and by programs and policies that provide opportunities and encouragement for walking. In addition to encouraging walking, these changes can help communities by improving safety, social cohesion, and local economies and by reducing air pollution.

## **Design Communities That Make It Safe and Easy for People of All Ages and Abilities to Walk**

People should be able to walk almost anywhere. Designing communities to encourage pedestrian activity will make it safer and easier for all users, including those with mobility limitations and other disabilities. For example, streets can be designed to include sidewalks and improve traffic safety, and communities can locate residences, schools, worksites, businesses, parks, recreational facilities, and other places that people regularly use within walkable distance of each other.

## **Promote Programs and Policies to Support Walking Where People Live, Learn, Work, and Play**

Walking is easiest when it is built into everyday activities and locations where people spend their time, such as worksites, schools, faith-based organizations, health clubs, parks, and senior centers. This can be done by providing accessible places to walk, offering walking programs, and implementing supportive policies. For example, schools can promote walk-to-school programs and make gyms and fields available to the public. Worksites can establish walking clubs for their employees. Communities can offer walking programs that address barriers such as mobility limitations.

## **Provide Information to Encourage Walking and Improve Walkability**

Easy-to-understand and relevant information about how walking can provide substantial health benefits can motivate people to walk. People also need information about the location of safe places to walk. Professionals from a variety of disciplines can be trained on the importance of walking and how to promote it within their profession.



## Everyone Can Help America Become a More Walkable Nation

Individuals and partners working together can make walking a national priority and create a national walking movement. A role exists for all sectors of society, including 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 also have an important role to play to help make the United States a walkable nation.



## Role of Individuals and Families: Incorporating Walking Into Your Life

Regular physical activity has substantial health benefits. People can get those benefits by walking or by adding brisk walking to other physical activities.

Here are some ways to add more walking to your daily life.

With family and friends:

- Take walks with a coworker at lunchtime.
- Make a standing walking date with a friend.
- Put a walk on the family schedule after dinner.
- Start or join a walking or hiking group.

For transportation:

- If you take a bus to work, get off a few stops early and walk.
- See whether you can do any of your errands by just walking or by walking and taking public transportation.
- If you drive, think about parking farther away from your destination.

## Role of Individuals and Families: Making Your Community Walkable

You can make your community more walkable. You do not have to be the head of a large company or the Surgeon General to create walkable communities. Any person, regardless of age or experience, can be part of this movement.

Here are some things you can do:

- Become a walking champion in your community by starting a walking group or encouraging other people to join one.
- Join or help mobilize a neighborhood clean-up effort to make places where people walk safe and attractive.
- Participate in community activities (for example, neighborhood watch) to reduce crime and violence.
- Join advisory boards, nonprofits, and community planning processes to support safe and convenient places to walk.



# Many Sectors Are Needed to Help America Become a More Walkable Nation

## Transportation, Land Use, and Community Design

All Americans use roads, and most people across the country use sidewalks and live in communities that have planned how their land will be used. Transportation, land use, and community design planners have the power to increase opportunities for walking and improve the pedestrian experience by designing and maintaining communities and streets to make them safe and accessible for all ages and abilities.

## Parks and Recreational and Fitness Facilities

Evidence shows that people with more access to green environments, such as parks, tend to walk more than those with limited access. Health and fitness facilities offer group walking programs and access to places for walking. Park and recreation planners can influence community health by increasing access to parks and helping people find ways to walk indoors in inclement weather.



## Schools

America's elementary, middle, and high schools have about 55 million students and 7.3 million teachers and staff members. Schools can provide their students and staff opportunities for physical activity and can promote safe routes for walking to school. They can also open facilities such as playgrounds and tracks for use by neighbors outside of school hours.

## Colleges and Universities

More than 7,000 American colleges and universities reach about 21 million students and employ nearly 4 million staff members. Colleges and universities can promote walking by creating pedestrian-friendly campuses and adopting policies that encourage walking. Colleges can also educate future professionals on the importance of physical activity, not only in health fields but also in other related areas.

## Worksites

Almost 150 million American adults are in the workforce, and many spend a significant amount of their day at work. The worksite can offer employees access to opportunities and supports for physical activity, including walking, making it easier for them to integrate it into their daily lives. Employers have the ability to improve the health of employees and their organizations' bottom line.

# STEP IT UP!

EVERYONE CAN HELP  
MAKE OUR COMMUNITIES  
MORE WALKABLE





*In 2012, almost 80% of U.S. adults reported that they had visited a health care professional sometime in the past 12 months.*

#### **Volunteer and Nonprofit Organizations**

Nonprofit organizations interact with all facets of American life. That means that nonprofits have many ways to promote walking. Some have facilities that can be used for walking. Others can reach particular groups, such as underserved populations, communities of color, or people with mobility limitations, or can work toward changes to the design of communities and streets. Because of their reach and the trusted relationships they have with their members, nonprofit organizations are in an excellent position to share messages about walking.

#### **Health Care**

In 2012, almost 80% of U.S. adults reported that they had visited a health care professional sometime in the past 12 months. Those encounters give health care professionals an opportunity to promote physical activity and walking as one way to be active. Many patients can walk, and walking can be easily modified to a person's abilities. Health care professionals can help patients overcome barriers to physical activity and put them on the path to better health.

#### **Media**

Television, radio, outdoor advertising, and other media all reach hundreds of millions of Americans daily. Media campaigns can remind people about the many benefits of walking, their choices for transportation, and how walking can make a community safer. Media outlets have the power to reach people and improve the health of their communities.

#### **Public Health**

Public health focuses on changing the health of groups of people. Public health professionals can identify evidence-based strategies for promoting and sustaining physical activity, including walking. They have the skills to bring together partners from other sectors to design and implement interventions that promote walking and improve the health of their communities.







## Communities Are Making a Difference



### When Walking Looks Different

In 2005, Raymond Bonner's spinal cord was damaged in a motorcycle accident. Today, he gets around in a wheelchair, but that doesn't stop him from walking. Raymond refers to his wheelchair rolling as walking. "Walking may look different for me than it does for other people," he says, "but I still get the same benefits out of it."

Raymond's walks originally began as a way to spend time with his wife, Kelly, in their hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. "I like the quality time," says Raymond. Since he started taking walks and eating healthier, Raymond has lost 30 pounds and finds that he's able to do more.

Raymond and Kelly also coach a track and field team for kids with disabilities. The increased strength and independence Raymond gets from walking have benefited him as a coach, too.

"When I tell the kids they can do something, they might not necessarily believe me, because I don't have a disability," says Kelly. "But when he shows them how, they realize, 'Oh! I can do that.' It shows them what they can do when they grow up."

The Bonners are now expecting their first child, a little girl. Raymond is thrilled. "I can't wait to walk with her," he says.

**Top** Raymond and Kelly Bonner coach a track and field team for kids with disabilities. **Bottom** The Bonners participate in a 5K race in California.

## An Inspiring Passion

As Mary Ann Rostel of Hamilton, New Jersey, approached her 60th birthday in 2008, she decided it was time to make some changes in her life. She was concerned about the diabetes that runs in her family, and she wanted to lose weight. So Mary Ann did something unexpected: She signed up for a walking half-marathon.



**Top** Mary Ann Rostel celebrates after finishing her first half marathon.  
**Bottom** Julianne Price, of the Indian River County Health Department (third from right), stands with county officials and West Wabasso residents after an abandoned home is demolished to create safe places to walk.

A few months later, she crossed her finish line. "It was an amazing feeling of accomplishment," she says. "I felt invincible." But the end of this race was only the beginning for Mary Ann. "I became addicted," she admits. Since then, she has walked 12 half-marathons, ten 10-mile races, and several 5K races. "I'm always training for something," she says.

Mary Ann's passion has inspired her family to become more active. Her daughters and grandson have all joined her for races. Even the little ones are getting involved: Mary Ann takes her youngest grandchildren out for long walks in their strollers. "It's a good way to sneak in a few extra miles," she says, "and they love it."

## Removing Barriers to Wellness

In 2004, more than 50% of residents in West Wabasso, Florida, were living below the poverty line. The roads were unpaved, and there were no sidewalks, streetlights, or safe public parks in this low-income community.

Over the course of 2½ years, the Indian River County Health Department worked with West Wabasso and a number of government agencies to make major improvements to the area. One change was to create safe public places for walking, exercise, and play. Projects included establishing bus routes, installing streetlights and sidewalks, removing abandoned homes, and improving local parks.

After the work was finished, West Wabasso residents were asked to fill out a survey on the changes to their community. Ninety-five percent of respondents said they spent more time exercising outside than they had 2 years earlier. They said the changes to their neighborhood, especially the streetlights and creation of safe places to exercise and walk outside, made a big difference in their quality of life.



## A Healthy City with a Healthy Economy

Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett recognizes the connection between health, quality of life, and the economic success of a city. He was one of the first policy makers to embrace placemaking and promotion of healthy lifestyles as an economic development strategy.

In 2007, Cornett launched a health initiative in which he challenged the city to lose 1 million pounds together. He also advocated for a new sales tax to fund public transportation, 70 acres of open park space, and more than 100 miles of trails and sidewalks. Cornett supported the

redesign and rebuilding of public spaces to make them more walkable—narrower streets, broader sidewalks, and more trees—to improve community health, walkability, quality of life, and economic development.

The walkability of a city, says Cornett, impacts not just physical health, but economic health as well. “Business leaders buy in to the importance of having a healthy, vibrant community. It’s not just a matter of health care costs. How do you recruit the top talent if you can’t offer them the lifestyle they’re looking for?”



Oklahoma City has redesigned public spaces to make them more walkable.



GirlTrek encourages women to walk every day.

## Walking to Heal

T. Morgan Dixon has done impressive things in her career, including working for the United Nations and Teach for America. She is proud of her accomplishments, but she also describes her “overachieving” as a way to cope with stress. In the face of educational inequity and poverty, Morgan worked harder, and her hard work came at the cost of self-care. When Morgan began experiencing chronic fatigue and symptoms of depression, she decided to do something about it: She trained for a 5K race, starting by walking. A few weeks in, Morgan realized that walking wasn’t just helping her get to the finish line. It was

a reminder of the resilience of African-American women—from Harriet Tubman to the women of the Montgomery bus boycotts. Walking was a way to improve her health, honor her past, and connect with people in her neighborhood.

Morgan was inspired to co-found GirlTrek, a national nonprofit that challenges African-American women and girls to walk each day as a declaration of self-care. GirlTrek has become a movement of 35,000 people across America who walk to heal their bodies, inspire their daughters, and reclaim the streets of their neighborhoods.



For more detailed information and resources on how to promote walking and make our communities more walkable, visit

**[www.surgeongeneral.gov](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov).**

