

A1 Why walking matters

Contents

- A1.1 Who walks and why
- A1.2 Why walking matters

Purpose

This module outlines the importance of walking to government, to businesses, to the community and to individuals.

Introduction

Despite a widespread awareness of the need for regular physical activity, up to one-half of the adult Australian population is insufficiently active (Bauman et al. 2002). With minimal effort, people could be more physically active if exercise could become part of their normal day, rather than a dedicated activity 'at the gym'. Walking is integral to this concept.

For the majority of Australians, walking is a low-cost and practical means of exercise and recreation that imposes virtually no cost on others, provides direct benefits to the individual undertaking the activity, increases social interaction, and enhances community wellbeing. Walking is also a feasible means of transport for many of the significant proportion of trips that are less than a kilometre in length, and even for some longer trips¹.

The average Australian's physical fitness is declining, and obesity levels are increasing. This is consistent with worldwide trends in many societies (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2003; World Health Organisation 2000; Newman 2004). Walking more can be an effective way of reversing these patterns.

Australians are becoming increasingly dependent on their cars. Australia has the highest rate of vehicle ownership per capita of any nation (see Figure A1-1). Moreover, modern subdivisions with a lack of walking facilities continue to reinforce the dependency on the car (see Figure A1-2).



Source: Austroads 2003

Figure A1-1

International comparisons of passenger vehicle ownership

¹ In Australia, 22% of work and school trips are less than 3 kilometres in length (Austroads 1999).



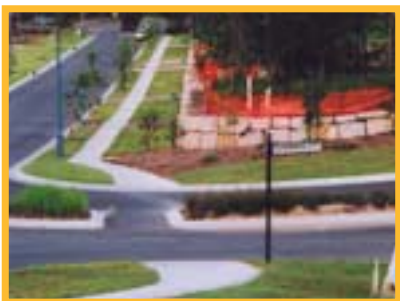


Figure A1-2
Modern subdivisions with and without walking paths

To counter these trends, many local governments are looking towards planning and promoting more sustainable forms of transport such as walking. Working from the neighbourhood level up, developing local walking strategies and providing appropriate facilities at the local level will assist in this task. Local governments will thus be able to assume a leading role in the preparation of local walking plans as a basis for encouraging a healthier lifestyle for all.

A1.1 Who walks and why

Walking is important to all groups of the community as a mode of transport. For the purposes of this document, the definition of walking covers all types of independent mobility, including the use of wheelchairs or motorised scooters.

Many people walk, and they walk for various reasons (see Table A1-1). Some choose to walk, and others walk because they have no choice. The former group includes those who walk for recreation and exercise (see Figure A1-3), for mental health and wellbeing, and for the convenience walking provides for short

Table A1-1
Who walks and why

Who walks	Why
Toddlers	To explore their world Because they can
Children	Too young to drive Parent and/or carer is not available To socialise with friends To explore the neighbourhood To attend school To visit shops For an errand Because they are with parents
Teenagers/ students	Too young to drive Cannot afford a car Family car not available To exercise To visit shops/video store To attend high school To travel to/from public transport To socialise with friends Because they are with parents
Young adults	Do not have a driver's licence Cannot afford a car Prefer to walk Cheaper to walk To travel to/from public transport To exercise To socialise with friends To attend work To visit shops To go bush walking For romance Because they are with family
Mature adults	Cannot afford a car Prefer to walk Cheaper to walk For quality time with children/ family/partner To exercise For relaxation and enjoyment For quiet reflection For recreation For convenience (for short trips) Do not have a driver's licence
Seniors	Do not have a driver's licence To socialise with friends and relatives To exercise To provide diversity to the daily regime For medical and general health For recreation

trips or as a connection to other modes of travel (see Figure A1-4). The latter group walk because they either do not have access to a vehicle, or are not able to drive one. This group is larger than might be perceived.

In Australia, over 40% of people do not have a driver's licence, either because they are too young to drive, they are disabled, the cost of car ownership is beyond their means, or because of other circumstances. Many people in the age group eligible to drive do not have a driver's licence, especially seniors and women. For example, 43% of people over 60 do not have a driver's licence; nor do 25% of women over 17, and 60% of women aged 60 or over (Ker & Tranter 1997).

A1.2 Why walking matters

For a multitude of reasons, walking matters. Walking matters to government, to society, to businesses and to individuals, as outlined below. More detail on the benefits of walking is provided in Module A2 *Benefits of walking*.

Walking matters to federal and state governments

An increase in walking can lead to positive outcomes for federal and state governments:

- ▶ Lack of exercise is a major contributor to a range of health issues (see A2.1 *Health benefits*). All of these add to the strain on the health services and hospital systems that are substantially financed by state and federal governments. Walking can effectively counter these issues (see the box 'Health benefits of walking').



Figure A1-3
Walking for recreation

Figure A1-4
Walking for convenience for short trips, for connecting with other modes of travel, or for people without access to a vehicle or who are not able to drive

Health benefits of walking

According to a recent study (Bauman et al. 2002), for every 1% increase in the proportion of the Australian population that is sufficiently active:

- ▶ 122 deaths per year from heart disease, diabetes and colon cancer could be avoided
- ▶ \$8 million in healthcare costs per year could be saved.

- ▶ Walking, instead of using the car, can make a major contribution to reducing air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental pollutants (Victoria Transport Policy Institute 2004).
- ▶ Providing suitable walking access and networks to public transport can help to increase public transport patronage, reducing the need for expensive car parking or bus interchange facilities, and the need to provide new roadway capacity and infrastructure. Poor walking access to public transport, however, hinders growth in the use of public transport (see Figure A1-5).
- ▶ Walking is consistent with key strategies for integrating land use and transport, including higher densities of development, transit-oriented development, urban villages and mixed-use development. Conversely, 'People living in more sprawling regions tend to drive greater distances, own more cars, breathe more polluted air, face a greater risk of traffic fatalities, and walk and use public transport less.' (Ewing, Pendall & Chen 2002).





Figure A1-5
The top photo shows good walking access to public transport. The bottom photo shows poor walking access to public transport.

- ▶ Walking and the walking environment are key components of the 'continuous accessible path of travel' that is a central concept in the application of the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.
- ▶ Walking supports ecological sustainability. The Queensland *Integrated Planning Act 1997* supports the need for sustainable, unpolluted and walkable communities.

Walking matters to local government

Local government can benefit from an increase in walking, for example:

- ▶ Places that are conducive to walking and have less motor vehicle traffic create stronger communities. The number of local social contacts people have is inversely related to the volume of traffic on the street where they live (Engwicht 1992).
- ▶ People who walk are more likely to demonstrate an active interest in the local community.
- ▶ People who walk are more likely to support local businesses and other activities.
- ▶ Walking programs, along with quality walking infrastructure, can help local governments meet targets for transport mode share, and can transform streets into attractive spaces.

Case study: Just Walk It

Just Walk It is a community-based walking program available to all local communities. It offers a cost-effective model for establishing regular walking groups within the local community.

The program is free to local agencies and has proven extremely successful. In 2004, over 4500 walkers across Australia were participating in the program, with the number of walkers growing by about 80 per month. Over 50 *Just Walk It* groups have been established in Brisbane alone.

For more information on setting up a *Just Walk It* program, visit the following website <<http://www.justwalkit.com.au>>.



Source: Heart Foundation
Figure A1-6
Just Walk It kit

Local walking programs

Many local governments have been planning and providing support for walking programs in their communities. Taking such a leading role in developing local walking strategies and providing walking facilities will encourage people to walk, and will improve community health and wellbeing (Queensland Health 2004; Department of Health and Ageing 2003). This complements an important goal of many councils seeking to create sustainable communities through their town plans, local area plans, integrated transport plans and community social plans, as in the Queensland communities of Hervey Bay, Caloundra City and Redland Shire; as well as the US Wasatch Front region in Utah (Zwart 2003; Caloundra City 2004; Redland Shire Council 2004; Envision Utah 2002).

A good example of a successful walking program for local communities is the Heart Foundation's *Just Walk It* (see the case study and Figure A1-6 above).



Figure A1-7
Walking develops children's learning skills, as well as offering quality time for families



Figure A1-8
Fitter and healthier employees take less time off work

Part B of *Easy Steps* provides information for local government authorities to develop their own walking plans and strategies.

Walking matters to society

Increased walking is important to society for many reasons, including:

- ▶ Walking and the associated provision of places that are attractive to people increases social interaction and enhances the richness and diversity of public life (Gehl 2002).
- ▶ Walking is the most equitable and inclusive form of transport, facilitating access at low cost and without requiring special skills or qualifications. It provides people with a real option not to own or use a car.

- ▶ Walking provides the opportunity to experience and interact directly with our environment. For children, this direct experience is an important factor in developing learning skills and the ability to be independent (Tolley, Bickerstaff & Shaw 2003) (see Figure A1-7).
- ▶ Walking enhances collective safety and security through more 'eyes on the street'.
- ▶ Walking encourages use of local businesses, services and facilities, at a time when many local businesses are experiencing difficulties competing with the big firms, especially in retail.
- ▶ Walking reduces the traffic, safety and parking pressures at key activity concentrations, such as schools, community facilities, neighbourhood shopping centres and sporting grounds.

Walking matters to businesses

A community that walks more can have a positive impact on businesses, including in the following ways:

- ▶ An active workforce is a more productive workforce.
- ▶ Fitter and healthier employees take less time off work (see Figure A1-8).
- ▶ Walking to work can reduce the need to provide car parking for employees and reduce parking impacts on the surrounding community.
- ▶ A walking culture, including a high-quality walking environment, attracts customers, including tourists and other visitors.

Walking matters to individuals

Walking is important to individuals for many reasons, including:

- ▶ Walking contributes to both the quality and length of life.
- ▶ Walking is a low-cost activity and can help reduce the impact of transport (typically 15% of household budgets in Australia is spent on transport (Austroads 2003)).
- ▶ Walking is an enjoyable activity that can be undertaken in a variety of ways to suit our needs and our moods.
- ▶ Walking links other modes of transport, greatly expanding the range of opportunities available.
- ▶ Walking offers quality time for families to spend together, while at the same time improving overall levels of personal and 'community' health (see Figure A1-7). Positive attitudes to walking can be passed on to the next generation.



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