



LET'S GET CANADA WALKING TO SOLVE THE DIABETES CRISIS

Diabetes in Canada is an alarming health care crisis

A 2013 press release issued from Sun Life Insurance Company stated that, "by 2020, 1 in 3 Canadians will have diabetes or pre-diabetes."

So far, efforts to slow and reverse this juggernaut have failed. As a result, the [Canadian Diabetes Strategy is under fire](#) according to Healthy Debate, a team of health care practitioners working with leaders across the health care system to provide the public with unbiased evidence, and informed opinions, about health care issues in Alberta, Ontario and Canada. In Ontario, \$746 million has been spent on diabetes with no decrease in rates of diabetes. Surprisingly, only 3% of that total has been spent on prevention.

[Diabetes is a preventable disease](#). Being overweight leads to a seven-fold increase in the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Obesity increases the risk of developing type 2 diabetes 20 to 40 times. The landmark [2001 Diabetes Prevention Program](#) study published by the New England Journal of Medicine, showed that walking 30 minutes five days a week and making moderate changes in diet halved the risk of diabetes in overweight people with high blood sugar. Participants also lost an average of 15 pounds in a year.

[A follow-up study](#) on the Diabetes Prevention Program after 10 years found similar results - Prevention or delay of diabetes with lifestyle intervention was most effective and persisted after a decade.

"Walking is a wonder drug!"

❖ *Dr. James Sallis, at the first National Walking Summit in Washington DC¹*

A 2011 article in the [Canadian Journal of Diabetes](#) bemoans the impact of the internet in reducing routine daily activities such as mailing a letter, resulting in increased risk of diabetes and vascular disease. "The happy corollary is that higher walking levels offer the potential for vascular risk reduction. For example, as demonstrated in the National

¹ Quoted in <http://www.planetizen.com/node/66461>.

Health Interview Survey by Gregg and colleagues and the Nurses' Health Study, the independent effects of higher walking levels accounted for a >30% reduction in mortality among patients with diabetes and/or hypertension."

"The only way we can overcome this chronic disease epidemic is to walk!"

❖ *George Halvorson, chairman of Kaiser Permanente, corporate champion of the US Everybody Walk collaboration*

A study published in the [Journal of the Canadian Public Health Association](#) suggested that a moderate increase in physical activity could yield major dividends in better and reduced costs. "If all older adults increase their activity level by the equivalent of a 20-minute/day walk, total inpatient days decrease by about 2.7%, equivalent to 1.7% of annual bed capacity in Canadian hospitals."

Over the past 24 months, there has been a deluge of studies concluding that, "[sitting is the new smoking.](#)" In fact, the health costs of prolonging sitting actually top the health costs of smoking. The average North American now spends 9.3 hours per day sitting, with deadly consequences. Studies have consistently shown that, even if people get the required amount of daily or weekly physical activity, prolonged sitting -- in front of a screen and behind the wheel -- is linked to an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, obesity, cancer and early death. The ideal solution is to break up the day with walking trips – walking to and from work or transit, taking walking breaks during the workday, and holding super-productive walking meetings.

The burgeoning Every Body Walk! Collaborative, powered by Kaiser Permanente and now supported by over 100 organizations has recognized that walking is the ideal solution to "sitting disease." On February 13, 2014, Kaiser Permanente announced a partnership with the American College of Sports Medicine to "[energize the medical community to prescribe walking for health.](#)" Imagine the impact on chronic disease rates including diabetes if we could get all Canadian doctors to prescribe walking for health!

The good news

The good news is that walking is the most popular activity for Canadians according to [Statistics Canada](#). But only 15% of Canadian adults and 5% of Canadian children meet the minimum requirements for physical activity. The challenge is to get Canadians to walk more, not just for occasional recreation but as an everyday means of transportation and moving more throughout each day.

There are many good reasons to support a national collaborative effort to get Canadians walking more.

Walking:

- is suitable for all ages and abilities
- is low or no-cost
- requires no learning
- reduces a host of chronic diseases
- improves mood and psychological well-being
- improves school and work performance



Walking and walk friendly communities

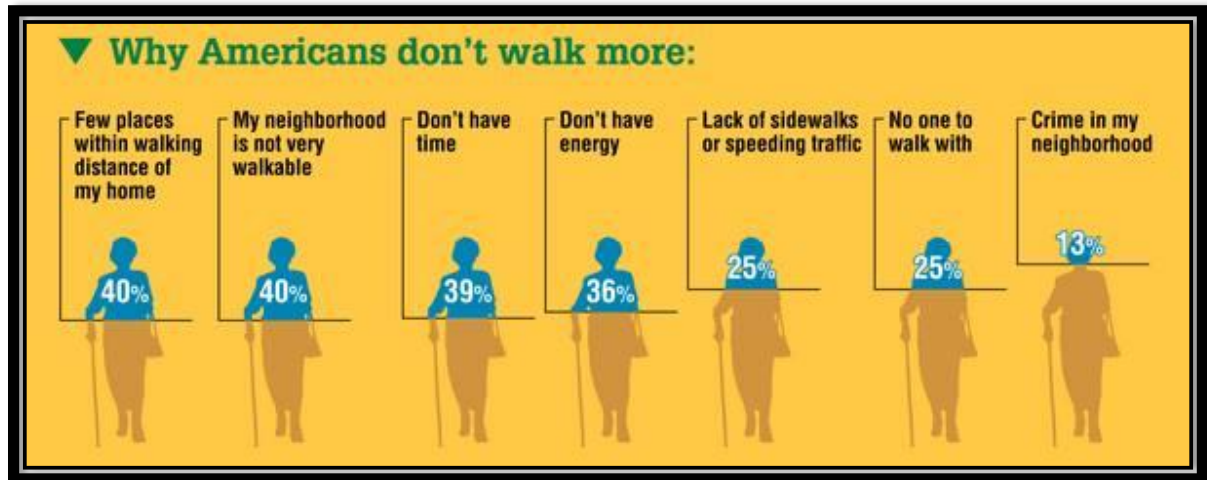
Although the promotion of walking is beneficial, persistent population-level benefits depend on creating places where people can safely and conveniently walk daily for transportation and recreation. A direct link between diabetes and walkability was demonstrated in a large-scale Canadian study that found **“an alarmingly strong link between diabetes and lack of walkability.”** The study, conducted in 2012 by St. Michael’s hospital in Toronto and the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences, examined data from more than one million Toronto residents and concluded that **“[people who lived in less walkable neighborhoods were significantly more likely over time to develop diabetes.](#)”** The least walkable neighbourhoods were often the most recently developed – low density and sprawling with separated land uses and characterized by significant car commuting.

[A second Toronto study](#) produced similar findings. A paper published in January 2014 looked at two elements of walkability, residential density and the availability of walkable destinations. It found **“*individuals in less walkable areas were up to one-third more likely to be obese or to have diabetes.*”**

“A [walk friendly communities program] is just what the doctor ordered to combat pandemic levels of chronic disease in this country, largely fueled by physical inactivity. Kudos to the corporate partner that recognizes the overwhelming need for this campaign!”

❖ *Dr. Mark Tremblay, Director of Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research, Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute; Professor, Department of Pediatrics, University of Ottawa; Chief Scientific Officer, Active Healthy Kids Canada*

US polling for the Every Body Walk! campaign found the following barriers to walking:



It would be useful to have Canadian data to reinforce and refine these findings. However, we know that our Canadian communities are in large part designed for the automobile.

The great news is that we know how to transform existing neighbourhoods to make them more walk friendly. Furthermore, improved health isn't the only benefit of walk friendly neighbourhoods. They also enjoy increased family and community wealth (property values, retail sales, employee satisfaction), reduced traffic congestion, reduced GHG emissions, improved air quality, enhanced social interaction, safer streets, improved pedestrian safety, and greater accessibility and mobility for all, including the young, the old, and people with disabilities.

"I applaud your emphasis on creating walking-friendly communities. I will do whatever is in my power to ensure that Alberta Health and the key stakeholders we work with support this initiative and promote it to all Albertans."

❖ *James Talbot, MD, PhD, FRCPC, Chief Medical Officer of Health for the Province of Alberta*

Let's get Canadians walking!

Walking is an effective prevention and management strategy to treat diabetes; more effective than continuing to research diabetes, more effective than encouraging Canadians to take out a gym membership or take up a sport. The solution to the diabetes epidemic is simple – "Walking is a wonder drug!" Let's get Canadians walking!