

Information Sheet 2: Environmental Benefits of Walking

How does walking help the environment?

Walking is not only very beneficial for our health and well being (see Fact Sheet 1) but it can also play an important role in improving our quality of life because it helps protect and improve the living environment and natural resources and it can be built into transportation systems.

Improving the environment also brings added health benefits that come, for example, from cleaner air, less traffic noise and fewer road accidents.

“Walking is highly efficient in its use of urban space and energy, it rarely causes injury and it gives streets vitality and personal security. Many car trips are quite short, less than 2 km, indicating that walking could be a feasible alternative and contribute to reducing the pollution from a cold-start vehicle travelling only a short distance.”

Mason, C. Transport and health: en route to a healthier Australia? Medical Journal of Australia 2000; 172:230-232

The full costs and risks of the choice of car travel over “active” forms of transport (walking and cycling and the use of public transport) are not widely acknowledged in the community.

Children are often the main losers of car dominated patterns of mobility as they have less opportunity for physical exercise, experience the greatest impact on their health in terms of obesity, respiratory diseases and hearing loss but also in terms of the psychological and economic impacts.

Much has been done already to improve the local environment but issues such as global warming demonstrate that there is a lot more that will have to be done to improve the environment in which we live. Individuals can help to improve the environment by reducing vehicle exhaust emissions, particularly for short trips when emissions can be the most toxic.

Walking and air quality

“The impact of air toxics is a significant environmental issue. These are gaseous, aerosol or particulate pollutants which are present in the air in low concentrations but which may be a hazard to human, plant or animal life. They are emitted from a wide range of sources, including combustion processes. Motor vehicles are a dominant source. While all Australians are exposed to some level of air toxics, the highest concentrations are found in urban areas.”

Australian Government Department of Environment and Heritage, 2005.

<http://www.deh.gov.au/index/atmosphere.html>

The links between air pollution and health are well documented, particularly the adverse effects on children.

Vehicles contribute greatly to air pollution by emitting substances that are harmful to our environment and our health. Air pollution can damage the environment we live in and our property. The sustainable alternatives to cars are walking and cycling.

By limiting driving and using public transport we not only save money on fuel and vehicle maintenance costs, but we also reduce the vehicle emissions and associated environmental costs and improve our health.

Emissions from cars are greatest when an engine is cold. The first few minutes when you start up and then drive your car produces the highest emissions because the emissions control equipment has not yet reached its optimal operating temperature. On a cold day a petrol car may take up to 10km to warm up and operate at maximum efficiency.

One of the best ways individuals can contribute to reducing air pollution is to leave the car at home for short trips and walk instead.

Walking and climate change

Australia produces almost 46 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. The average family's transport is estimated to generate about six tonnes of greenhouse gas each year mostly due to car usage.¹

"The transport sector is a major contributor to climate change. Transport emissions – already responsible for 28% of total greenhouse emissions in New Zealand and 16% in Australia – are increasing more rapidly in both countries than those from any other sector.."

Woodward, A, Hales, S and Hill, SE. Protecting the Planet - The motor car and public health: are we exhausting the environment. Medical Journal of Australia 2002; 177 (11/12):592-593

Walking more and using the car less is one way we can all help reduce the impact of greenhouse emissions on global warming.

Walking and noise levels

"Traffic noise is probably the most serious and pervasive type of noise pollution. Studies have shown that on a daily basis almost 40 per cent of Australia's population is exposed to undesirable levels of traffic noise and a further 10 per cent is exposed to excessive levels."

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"Traffic noise has become a serious problem now because of inadequate urban planning in the past. Homes, schools, hospitals, churches, libraries and other community buildings were routinely built on main roads without buffer zones or adequate soundproofing. The problem has been compounded by increases in traffic volumes far beyond the expectations of our early urban planners."

Australian Academy of Science. Nova, June 2002

<http://www.science.org.au/nova/072>

¹ <http://www.greenhouse.gov.au/gwci/transport.html>

Road traffic noise is a major contributor to high noise levels, particularly around schools and places of work.

In adults it can affect our sense of well being and lead to sleep disturbance as well as hearing loss if we are exposed to high noise levels for long periods of time.

Walking instead of driving helps reduce the traffic and the noise levels as well as having positive effects on other aspects of the environment and our personal health and well being.