



# Walking facts and figures 1: The benefits of walking

## Health

**'If a medication existed which had a similar effect to physical activity, it would be regarded as a "wonder drug" or a "miracle cure"' (Donaldson 2010)**

**Regular physical activity is essential for good health, but most of us don't do enough of it.**

- The Chief Medical Officer recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on five days a week for adults, and at least 60 minutes every day for children. To prevent obesity, the CMO recommends 45-60 minutes in most cases (Department of Health 2004).
- Routine regular moderate activity may be more beneficial than short bursts of more intense activity (Westerterp 2001).
- Activity can be taken in a single session or in several shorter bouts (Department of Health 2004). Ten minutes three times a day is as beneficial as 30 minutes once a day (Murphy and Hardman 1998).
- An inactive person spends 37% more days in hospital and visits the doctor 5.5% more times than an active person (Sari 2008).
- People over 50 who are physically active enjoy between 1.1 and 3.7 more "quality life years" than average (Heron & Bradshaw 2010)
- An active lifestyle in childhood or adolescence may "track through" into adulthood (BHF 2009a).
- Only around a third of people achieve the minimum recommended levels.
- 38% of children in the UK now spend less than an hour a day outdoors, and 23% spend more than 14 hours a week in front of a screen (Bendon 2009). Adults spend 16 times longer watching TV than being physically active (Donaldson 2010).

Percentage meeting physical activity recommendations				
	Men	Women	Boys	Girls
England	40% <sup>a</sup>	28% <sup>a</sup>	32% <sup>b</sup>	24% <sup>b</sup>
Scotland	42% <sup>c</sup>		74% <sup>d</sup>	63% <sup>d</sup>
Wales <sup>e</sup>	36%	23%	70%	60%

a - National Statistics / The Information Centre 2008a

b - Health Survey for England 2008 (Craig et al 2009). Note the discrepancies between England, and Wales and Scotland are due to a new and possibly more accurate method for collecting data in England.

c - NHS Health Scotland 2006

d - Scottish Executive 2005

e - National Public Health Service for Wales 2007

- Inactivity is now one of the ten leading global causes of death and serious illness, responsible for 1.9million deaths each year (WHO 2002).

**Inactivity is a key factor in the dramatic growth of obesity.**

- 61% of English adults (65% of men and 56% of women) and 30% of children are overweight or obese. 24% of adults and 17% of children are clinically obese (National Statistics 2008c).  
*Overweight and obesity are defined by the World Health Organisation according to body mass index (BMI), calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by the square of height in metres. A BMI of 25 or more is overweight, while 30 or more is obese (WHO 2006).*
- If current trends continue, levels of obesity will rise to 60% of men, 50% of women and 25% of children by 2050, with almost nine out of ten adults overweight or obese (Foresight 2007).
- People with a BMI over 35 are 20 times more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes compared to those with a BMI of 18-25. The risk of Coronary Artery Disease increases 3.6 times with each unit of BMI, while 85% of high blood pressure is associated with BMI over 25. Excess weight is also linked to cancer and fatty liver disease (HM Government 2008).

- Decreasing activity levels rather than increasing calorie intake may be the dominant factor in the rise in obesity (Prentice and Jebb 1995).

**'Walking is the nearest activity to perfect exercise.'** (Morris and Hardman 1997)

### Walking is healthy physical activity.

- Moderate physical activity includes walking as well as cycling, swimming, gardening, heavy housework and sport (Department of Health 2004).
- All walking is beneficial, but for the greatest benefits to heart, lungs and blood pressure, brisk is best. You should be breathing a little faster, feeling a little warmer and can feel your heart beating a little faster, but you still feel comfortable and are able to talk (Walking the way to Health 2009, BHF 2009).
- Walking one mile/1.6km in 20 minutes can burn up at least 100kcal/420kJ of energy, as much as swimming for 10 minutes, playing football for 12 minutes or doing aerobics for 16 minutes. Walking two miles/3.2km a day, four times a week, can help reduce weight by 0.5kg/1 pound every month (Morris and Hardman 1997).
- Walking a mile burns around the same amount of calories as running a mile, although of course it takes longer (McArdle, Katch & Katch 1986).

### Regular brisk walking will

- Improve performance of the heart, lungs and circulation.
- Lower blood pressure.
- Reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and strokes – inactive and unfit people have double the risk of dying from CHD.

### Walking regularly at any speed will

- Help manage weight.
- Reduce the risk of Type 2 diabetes – active people have between a third and a half less chance of developing this than inactive people – and help control the condition once it is established.
- Reduce the risk of certain cancers – active people have 40-50% lower risk of

developing colon cancer than inactive people, and lower risks of developing breast and lung cancer.

- Improve flexibility and strength of joints, muscles and bones, and reduce the risk of and help manage osteoporosis.
- Increase “good” cholesterol.
- Boost the immune system.

*(References for previous two sections: Bird and Reynolds 2002, Blood Pressure Association 2008, British Heart Foundation 2009b, Cavill and Foster 2009, Department of Health 2004, Fleshner et al 2004, Shephard 1997, Walking the Way to Health 2009)*

### Walking improves mental health.

- Regular walking improves mood, reduces anxiety, aids sleep and improves self-image (Department of Health 2004, Mind 2008, Walking the Way to Health 2009).
- Active people have a reduced risk of suffering clinical depression (DH 2004).
- Regular physical activity is at least as effective as antidepressant drugs in treating mild and moderate depression (Mental Health Foundation 2005).
- Walking in a group is a sociable activity that can help improve mental health and overcome feelings of isolation, a benefit that is highly valued by participants in group walks (Dawson et al 2006).
- Spending time in the outdoors and in contact with the natural environment can have a positive effect on mental health (Pretty et al 2005, Seymour 2003).

### For most people, walking is the easiest way to meet physical activity recommendations

Unlike many other forms of activity...

### **...almost everyone can get started easily and at minimal expense...**

- Walking is free and requires no special equipment, training or gym or club memberships.
- Walking is safe and low-impact, with a low risk of injuries and accidents.
- You can walk almost anywhere and at any time.
- You can start slowly and easily and build up gradually (Ramblers 2007).

**...and it's one of the easiest activities to fit into your everyday life.**

- You can walk from your doorstep at a time that suits you.
- You can use walking for everyday short journeys, enjoying healthy activity at the same time as getting from A to B.
- You don't need to concentrate on the walking itself, leaving you free to enjoy your surroundings, chat or think.
- You can enjoy a variety of surroundings as you walk in different places and different seasons (Ramblers 2007).
- Increases in gym membership have done little to halt the decline in activity levels. One fifth of gym members attend once a month or less, and since 2007 gym memberships have been in decline (Bee 2008, Deloitte 2006, Donaldson 2010, Smith Maguire 2008).

**The accessibility of walking is particularly important for those most at risk from low activity levels.**

- The benefits are proportionately greater if the most inactive become moderately active, compared to moderately active people becoming more active: the "dose-response effect" (HM Government 2009).
- Low levels of physical activity are associated with low levels of household income (National Statistics 2008a).
- Membership and admission costs are a significant barrier to participation in physical activity: gyms are most often used by the better-off (Scottish Executive 2006; Smith Maguire 2008).
- Improving public spaces and promoting walking as active travel will help reduce health inequalities as well as combating climate change (Marmot 2010).

**"Brisk walking has the greatest potential for increasing the overall activity levels of a sedentary population...[and] is most likely to be adopted by a range of ages, socioeconomic and ethnic groups"** (Hillsdon and Thorogood 1996).

## Sustainable transport

**Walking is the most natural and inclusive means of transport.**

- Walking is free.
- Walking doesn't involve the use of vehicles, machinery, fuel or special equipment.
- Walkers don't need training.
- If we all swapped one car journey a week to walking, car traffic levels would reduce by at least 10% (Sustrans 2009).

**Walking doesn't pollute.**

- Walking doesn't produce excess carbon dioxide. One person switching five journeys of under 2km a week from the car to walking would reduce their carbon footprint by 86kg a year (Potter 2004).
- Walking doesn't produce noxious fumes. People in cars typically face pollution levels two to three times higher than those faced by walkers (Environmental Transport Association 1997).
- Walking doesn't cause noise pollution.

**Walking is an efficient use of public space**

- Walkers rarely cause congestion.
- Three times as many people can move in the same space by walking as on a bus and almost 20 times as many as in a car (London Analytics, cited in Bell 2007).
- Meanwhile 590 sq km/228 sq miles of land in the UK, an area twice the size of Birmingham, is devoted to vehicle parking while roads occupy 2,848 sq km/1,100 sq miles, equivalent to more than the whole of Leicestershire (CPRE 1995).

**Improving walking conditions improves access to public transport.**

- Walking is the main means of accessing public transport (DfT 2003).
- Better pedestrian links to transport interchanges and more walkers visible on the streets help overcome safety fears and encourage people to regard public transport as a viable alternative to the private car (Transport for London 2004).

## Economic benefits

### Walkers in the countryside contribute to the rural economy.

- Walkers in the English countryside spend around £6.14billion a year, generating income in excess of £2billion and supporting up to 245,000 full time jobs (Christie and Matthews 2003).
- In 2008, people in Scotland took over 384million recreation trips to the outdoors, spending £2.8billion. Almost 80% had come to walk (Cuninghame 2009). Walking also generates an estimated £438million from visitors to Scotland (Transport for Leisure 2001).
- Walking tourism in rural and coastal Wales is estimated to contribute over £550million to the economy (Wales Tourist Board 2005).
- 62million leisure trips are made to the English coast every year, worth £2.3billion (Natural England 2006).

### Popular walking routes are major assets to the tourist industry.

- The South West Coast Path generates £307million a year for the economy of the region, supporting over 7,500 jobs. 27.6% of all visitors come solely to walk the trail, spending £136million a year. Local residents take 23million walks along the route annually, spending £116million. The annual cost of maintaining the path is around £500,000 (Southwest Tourism/University of Exeter 2003, South West Coast Path Partnership 2007).
- Hadrian's Wall Path, opened in 2003 with significant lengths of new access, has seen user numbers double, with around £5million spent locally by visitors on the trail (Natural England 2007).
- Accommodation providers on the Pembrokeshire Coast Path National Trail in Wales say almost 40% of their guests come to walk the trail and almost half of providers report the trail is "very important to the profitability" of their business (Tourism Company 2006).
- The West Highland Way, Scotland's most popular official long distance route,

attracts 75,000 visitors a year, generating £3.5million and supporting around 200 local businesses (Wood-Gee 2008).

- The proposed English coastal path will generate £2,572million per year for the local economies and support 100,000 full time jobs (Christie and Matthews 2006).

### Walking brings economic benefits to urban areas.

- 44% of shoppers arrive on foot in London town centres (TfL 2004).
- More attractive and walkable streets can increase house values and business rents by around 5% (CABE 2007).
- London's West End VIP (Very Important Pedestrian) Days in December and May, when Oxford and Regent Streets are closed to traffic, have been a huge success, increasing footfall by up to 40%. Stores now welcome the days, some achieving their best sales figures of the year (New West End Company 2008).
- Applying the Government's own methods of assessing the economic benefits of transport schemes to local walking and cycling routes gives benefit to cost ratios of 20:1, considerably higher than rail and road schemes which typically have ratios of 3:1 (Sustrans 2006).

### More people walking could bring vast savings to the nation's health bill.

- Physical inactivity currently costs the NHS in England between £1billion and £1.8billion a year. Costs to the wider economy are conservatively estimated at £5.5billion in sickness absence and £1billion in premature deaths – a total of £8.3billion (Allender et al 2007, HM Government 2009).
- Health services in each of the 152 Primary Care Trust areas in England spend an average of £5million a year on dealing with the consequences of physical inactivity (HMG 2009).
- Direct costs to the NHS of obesity alone are currently around £4.2billion a year, with an estimated cost to the wider economy (for example through sickness absence) of £16billion. If current trends

continue, this may rise to £50billion by 2050 (Foresight 2007).

- The value of a one point reduction in a person's BMI is £6,000 in terms of increased life expectancy alone, without even counting the reduced cost to the health service (DH 2010).
- £1 spent on a health walk scheme will save the local NHS £7 (Heron & Bradshaw 2010).
- Switching 20% of car commuter trips to walking or cycling could be worth £2.8billion a year to the Scottish economy. A 40% switch could yield up to £5.5billion (Warren 2008).

## Social benefits

**Walking is sociable, improving our sense of community and helping tackle crime and the fear of crime – also good for our mental health.**

- When walking it's easy to stop, chat or simply say hello (DfT 2004).
- A classic US study found that residents of streets with light traffic typically had three

more friends and twice as many acquaintances as those on streets with heavy traffic (Appleyard 1981). A similar study in Bristol found residents of heavy streets had a quarter the number of local friends and half the number of acquaintances compared with those on light streets, and also viewed their "home territory" as much reduced (Hart 2007)

- Measures to increase walking such as slower traffic speeds help local residents take ownership of their streets and increase surveillance that deters crime – the "eyes on the street" effect (Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Centre 2007).
- Children who walk to school have wider social networks than those who don't (Walk to School 2008).
- Improving the walkability of the environment also improves its liveability, resulting in surroundings at human scale that facilitate not only walking but social interaction, play, relaxation, discovery and enjoyment.

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