

Health Benefits

Chapter 5

People Are Walking Less

PEOPLE are walking less these days. You read about this situation in the newspaper, hear about it on the radio, or see it on the evening news—but common sense also tells you the same thing.

How often do your kids play outside on beautiful, warm sunny days? How often do they go for a bike ride? How often do you see a senior citizen taking a walk? How often do you see a parent pushing a baby carriage down the street? How often do you see families walking or biking together, enjoying nature and getting exercise?

Those people who think that surfing the Web is an effective replacement for taking a walk greatly underestimate the difference between a computer and the human body!



Photo by Leslie Kettren

Photo 78.

Today's children watch more TV than their parents. Modern technology sometimes provides a disincentive to exercise, however people must set aside part of each day to exercise in order to stay healthy. Lack of exercise is making the people of our nation fat.



Diagram 2.
People Are Walking Less

*1995 U.S. Department of Transportation
Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey*

1975-1995
Walking Trips

Adults	42% less
Children	37% less



In 1995, the U.S. Department of Transportation conducted a nationwide personal transportation survey on the number of walking trips people make. The results showed that 42% of adults and 37% of children walked less than they did in 1975.

Increased walking and bicycling can improve health through aerobic exercise. When communities are walkable, we all benefit. The feelings of isolation and of sitting alone at home or in a car on a congested highway—diminishes. The ability to exercise benefits the physical and mental health of our children. A walkable community benefits parents because they can reduce the number of times they have to haul their kids around to various activities.

According to the National Center for Bicycling and Walking ¹, physical inactivity is a major cause of sickness and disease. Inactivity—and its close companion obesity—are responsible for as many as 23 percent of all premature deaths from the major chronic diseases. You’ve read it before in this book but it bears repeating—one of the major causes is urban sprawl and a road system that is built for cars, rather than for people. The drop in physical activity—and the related surge in obesity—parallels the lack of opportunities we have to bicycle and walk *in* and *beyond* our communities.

Walking and bicycling aren’t just about enjoying the outdoors—they are key components to practicing preventative medicine. Back in 1918, the U.S. Children’s Bureau wrote that the health of the child is the power of the nation. That’s

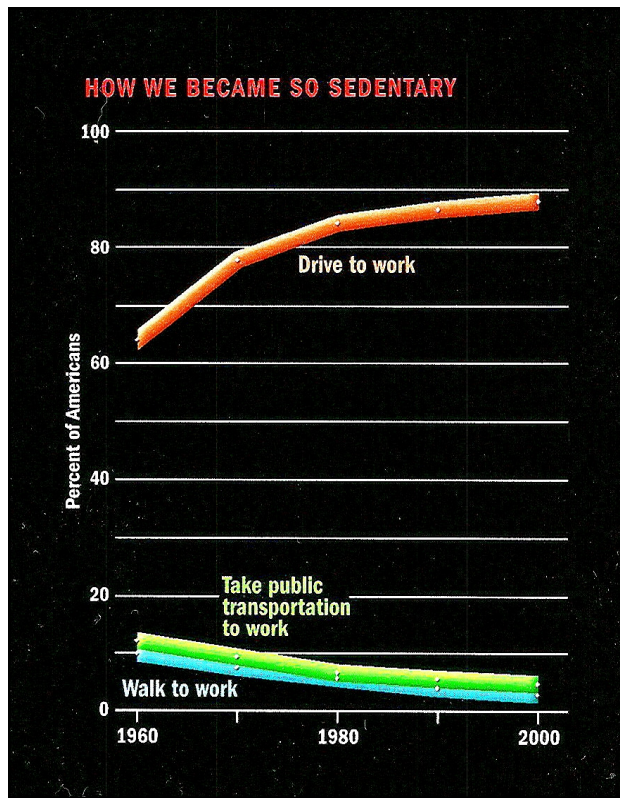
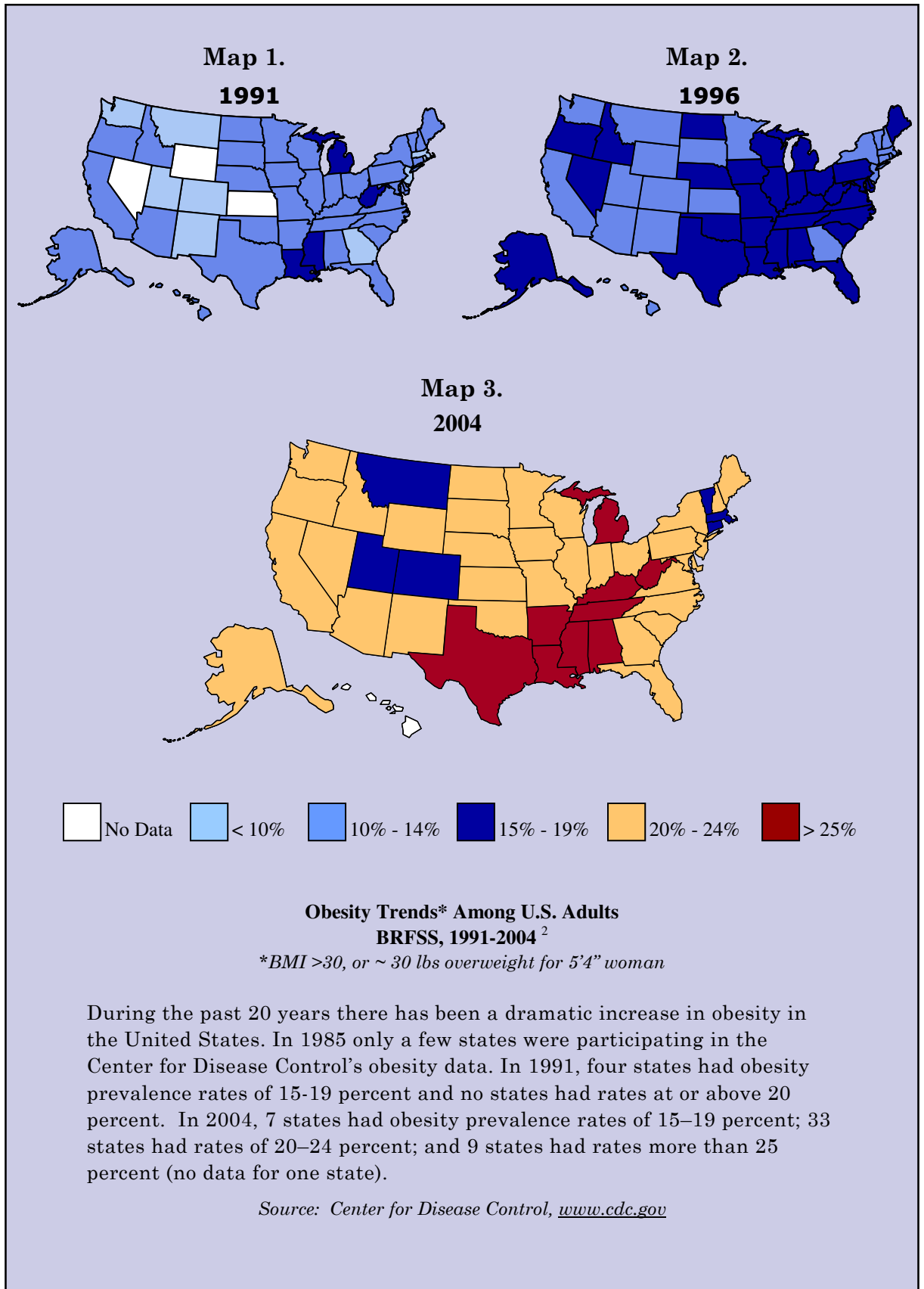


Diagram 3.
How We Became So Sedentary

*National Geographic Magazine
August 2004, pages 56-57.*

It’s not all about food. We are gaining weight because we are exercising less. Obesity has reached red alert levels among children and adolescents, almost tripling since 1980—and small wonder. Suburban sprawl and lack of pedestrian-friendly streets have kids being driven instead of walking to school.



why people in public health today are so alarmed about the percentage of overweight young people. And we all know that as we get older, we tend to exercise less and less.

Why are people walking less? Here is what Bill Wilkinson, executive director of the National Center for Bicycling and Walking says is the reason:

"It's more hostile out there: The traffic is faster, the roads are wider, the enforcement is down, and the courts are a joke. The majority of motor vehicle operators who hit and kill pedestrians are never cited for anything more than a misdemeanor at the most."

It All Comes Down To This

In the first few chapters, I explained what makes a community walkable. This chapter is about health risks. Simply put, community leaders and road designers have a responsibility to see that our streets are designed and built for walking and bicycling. And, the public has a responsibility to elect leaders that understand the importance of a walkable community. Wouldn't that be nice?



Photo 79. Marquette

The community leaders in this photo are committed to making their town more walkable by participating in a walking audit (see sidebar on page 7).

2003 Survey – U.S. Kids Less Active

*Michael O'Shea, Ph.D., fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine,
Parades Guide to Better Fitness, May 9, 2004*

"Don't just tell your children to be more active—do it with them," advises Dr. Susan Vincent of Brigham Young University. "Swim, bike, hike, roller blade or play ball with your kids. Let them see you being active and eating better."

In 2003, Dr. Vincent released the results of a study in which she compared the number of steps taken daily by Americans aged 6—12 and kids of the same age in Australia and Sweden. From the start of the school day until bedtime, 1954 kids wore sealed pedometers that measured their total steps for four consecutive days. On average, kids in the U.S. took 2000 fewer steps daily than the Swedish children, who were the most active.

You also might want to consider parking the car in the garage more often. The study stressed the value of creating an environment conducive to activity. For example, the Swedish children lived in communities that were designed to encourage walking and biking.

City Girl's Loneliness in Her Suburban Switch is Normal

Dr. Joyce Brothers column, July 19, 2004, Oakland Press

Dear Dr. Brothers,

I am a city girl who is stuck in the suburbs. It seemed like a good idea a year ago, when my husband and I finally saved enough money to buy a nice home outside the city, and we are planning to have children here. I thought I would enjoy being in a less-crowded, less-noisy and less-dirty atmosphere, and I do enjoy that aspect of things. But I am not used to being in a car all the time; we didn't even have a car in the city. And while I have met a few neighbors, I feel lonely much of the time—I miss my friends and the fast pace of the city. I am sort of sad. Am I just spoiled, or will I get used to this? -T.W.

Dear T.W.,

Of course you are not spoiled. It is a whole new way of life for you to live in the suburbs, and change is difficult and even scary for many of us. You are the proverbial fish out of water. And if it makes you feel any better to know that you are not alone, you represent a type of suburban dweller who is inspiring town planners to make future suburbs more like old-fashioned towns, with homes close together and lots of places people can walk to—shops, restaurants and parks in which they can gather during the day.

A survey taken recently by a transportation group in Washington, D.C., revealed that whereas 71 percent of people walked to school as a child, only 18 percent of their children walk to school now. When you have a child, perhaps you will try to find one of these old-fashioned communities—or a newly designed one—with sidewalks and real neighborhoods, where the kids play in back yards, or on their cul-de-sacs instead of being driven across town to “play dates” by isolated parents.

But in the real world we know that is not always the case. Today unfortunately, all communities and neighborhoods are *not* walkable. If we as a nation are to encourage people to exercise more often, we all need to work together to reach those goals.

Have you ever heard someone say that they can't walk to the store or to the library, or to the post office, or to the park, and so

on—because it is too far, and besides there is no sidewalk, and they don't want to walk on the street, and blah, blah, blah? People already have enough reasons and excuses not to exercise. Don't let the way your community is designed be one of them.

The next chapter gives you strategies for *how* to build healthy, walkable communities.

Chapter 5 Endnotes

¹ The next couple of paragraphs were taken from the website of the National Center for Bicycling and Walking at www.bikewalk.org. This website is packed with great information and I highly recommend that you take some time to download the free booklets and other materials. I also encourage you to investigate the many other websites that are linked.

² Definitions:

- Obesity: having a very high amount of body fat in relation to lean body mass, or Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or higher.
- Body Mass Index (BMI): a measure of an adult's weight in relation to his or her height, specifically the adult's weight in kilograms divided by the square of his or her height in meters.

The information shown in these maps was collected through the Center for Disease Control's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). Each year, state health departments use standard procedures to collect data through a series of monthly telephone interviews with U.S. adults. For more information, visit the website at www.cdc.gov.