Active transportation means using human-powered transportation (rather than cars or other motorized vehicles) to get to and from local destinations, such as work, school, businesses, facilities, events and much more.

Active transportation involves having a purpose or destination, rather than just going out for a stroll or some light exercise. Whether stepping out to pick up milk and eggs, cycling with your children to their school, or walking or biking to work, active transportation can be a healthy, practical option.

This article offers a variety of tips and insights to help you and your community work towards your active transportation goals.

Why Promote Active Transportation?

Encouraging active transportation is an excellent way to help people add more physical activity into their day.

Lack of time is often a barrier that people cite, when asked why they aren’t as physically active as they would like to be. A 2011 report\(^1\) by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada noted that “almost a third of respondents (31%) say the time they would like to spend being physically active, they instead spend commuting.”

When using active transport, physical activity becomes part of a person’s daily activities, instead of something they struggle to “fit in” to their busy lives.

We know that sedentary behavior (like sitting for long periods in a car during daily commutes) is unhealthy. We also know that regular physical activity helps to improve health and may help to prevent chronic health

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conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, lung disease and some cancers.

As noted in the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults, bouts of physical activity as short as 10 minutes at a time are beneficial to health. In this sense, it’s clear that every trip in a vehicle that can be replaced by active transportation is good for a person’s health.

Health of Your Community

Active transportation is not only good for the health of individuals; it also brings benefits to local communities. Here are some examples:

• Leaving the car behind – and instead choosing to walk or cycle for short trips or errands in the community – can lead to safer and calmer local streets, with less traffic.

• Active transportation as a travel mode is slower and less isolated than being in a car (e.g., with the car windows rolled up and radio playing). When people use active modes of travel to move around their community they tend to notice and interact with others more often. For example, stopping to chat with a neighbour or group of people can lead to a sense of community cohesion.²

In the summer of 2009, a unique “eco-mobility” initiative coordinated by the City of Edmonton brought together diverse partners to reduce car-dependency and strengthen communities. The LocalMotion demonstration project took place in the City’s Parkallen neighbourhood. Among other benefits, the project report noted:

“As more residents use their neighbourhood parks, pathways, and sidewalks, they are also reconnecting with their community and creating safer, vibrant, and more livable neighbourhoods.”

Another benefit for communities is that human-powered transport is much friendlier to the environment.³ Plus, using active transport can save each person or family a lot on fuel and vehicle maintenance costs.

Considering Neighbourhood Design Features

Promoting active transportation is not just about building sidewalks and bike lanes. It’s about building communities on a “human scale.”

For instance, picture a mature or traditional neighbourhood in your municipality; it was most likely built on a grid system with straight roads and avenues. The blocks are not too long and at each intersection there is the option of travelling four different directions. Generally, these older-style neighbourhoods are quite walkable and good for cycling.

Now, contrast that view with what you see in many of today’s newer neighbourhoods. These are often part of today’s urban and suburban sprawl; and they are most likely designed with curvy roads (sometimes called loops and lollipops) and many cul-de-sacs. A block can be very long and many intersections may be T’s (three-way), providing a limited choice of travel directions. These newer neighbourhoods are usually much less efficient for non-motorized travel as a person may have to go out of their way to get where they want to go.⁴

Here’s another important angle to keep in mind; people living in areas where there’s a mix of housing and shops are more likely to use various forms of active transportation. For instance, a collaborative Australian initiative (involving such groups as health agencies, a national association of local governments, and the Planning Institute of Australia) reports:
A compact, walkable, mixed-use design makes it possible for people to walk or bike safely and easily to everyday places, such as the grocery store, school, work or other community facilities and destinations.5

**Action Mode: Boosting Active Transportation**

The next sections offer just a few active transportation suggestions, for individuals and groups.

**Individuals**

Given the many benefits of active transportation, there are lots of things people can do to promote and encourage active transportation in their communities. Here are just a few tips:

- Be proactive! Stay informed. Get involved with your community, workplace, school or bicycle commuters group. Consider joining relevant listservs or social media groups/lists.
- Check your municipal website for open houses and other notices about community projects, developments and redevelopment plans; aim to participate in workshops and planning sessions.
- Look for opportunities to piggyback onto an existing project. For instance, if an intersection is slated to be redone, ask for missing curb cuts to be installed to help those with mobility challenges. Or, if needed, ask for changes in the signal timing of a crossing light, to boost walkability and safety.
- Keep in mind every community and situation is unique; there are no cookie cutter solutions. Complete a walkability audit6 and bikeability checklist7 to help determine where your community can make improvements.

**Municipalities**

- Features and designs that can help boost active transportation should be supported by municipalities, as part of planned projects/developments. This may include “complete street” design guidelines8, safe bike lanes, walking trails and bike racks on buses.

**Developers**

- Developers, planners and designers can help by designing new subdivisions or other developments that are suitable for walking, cycling and wheeling. This includes not only the layout of the residential homes, but also making land space available for a mix of uses (e.g., recreation, trails, sidewalks, roads, bike lanes) and buildings (e.g., shops, services, facilities.)

**Employers**

- Guaranteed Ride Home Program. This policy ensures that should an emergency come up (e.g., family illness and a trip to hospital needed), an employee who uses active transportation will be provided with alternatives. For instance, the employee could be reimbursed for taxi fare or may be allowed use of a company vehicle.
- Safe, secure bike racks. Employers can provide safe, secure bike racks, e.g., well-designed bike racks that are in a well lit, high traffic area. For anti-theft purposes, the racks may be in a fenced area that is locked, or inside the workplace.
- Shower/change facilities. Arriving to work by an active mode of transportation can be physically exerting. If employees know safe and clean shower/change facilities are available at the workplace, it can help make the use of active transportation a more attractive option.
Schools

- Organize a Walking School Bus. Organize a bus with other parents in the community; this allows children to walk or cycle in a group to and from school, under adult supervision.
- Restrict parking around the school. Designate an area a few blocks from the school as a safe drop-off area. Organize a walking school bus from the drop-off area to the school.
- Provide safe and secure bike racks.
- Work with your local traffic safety association to boost safety, which can help people feel better about using active modes of travel. Work together to train and organize road crossing patrols at intersections and busy traffic areas near the school.

Active Transportation is Healthy and Purposeful

Active transportation is not only healthy, it’s purposeful. By fitting active transportation into your life, you’ll get the exercise you need, while getting things done at the same time.

Once you and your family members have “broken the ice” by using active transportation a few times, it will be more likely to become part of your routines, leading to health benefits and other benefits for you and your community.

Last but not least, remember that active transportation doesn’t have to mean you give up the car keys! Just use active modes as often as you can, perhaps one or two days week for starters, then build on that momentum.

Footnotes in this article are for the references. To view the references and useful links associated with this article, go to www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/wellspring.html.

As the Resource Coordinator at the Alberta Centre for Active Living, Rosanne Prinsen has developed an interest in active transportation and urban design; she represents the Centre on active transportation committees and liaises with active transportation groups and networks. She compiles the weekly Physical Activity Information Round-Up; check it for resources and research on active transportation, urban design and other physical activity topics.

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