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Designing Heart-Healthy Communities

We've had enough of good advice. The real secret to fitness is to live in an environment that encourages it.

By **Geoffrey Cowley and Karen Springen**
Newsweek

Oct. 3, 2005 issue - Forecasting heart disease is becoming an ever-finer art, as researchers learn more about the risk factors. But here's a predictor you may not have heard about: street address. In a study published last year, scientists at the RAND Corp. scored 38 metropolitan areas on the "sprawl index"—basically a measure of their dependence on cars. When the researchers tallied disease rates for the same areas, an interesting pattern emerged. Other risk factors aside, people in densely populated places graced with sidewalks and shops had the lowest rates of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and stroke. And the rates rose steadily as communities became more spread-out and less walkable. Statistically, a person living in Boston or San Francisco was healthier than an identical person in Atlanta or San Bernardino. Without even trying, the folks in those more-compact communities were apparently exercising enough to ward off chronic illness. As the RAND team deduced, "suburban design may be an important new avenue for health promotion."



Photographs by Jason Fulford for Newsweek

U-Turn: Planners have started giving pedestrians right of way (pictured from top left are Joseph and Willette Ladnier and bottom right is Kate Garvey)

NEWSWEEK ON AIR

Heart Health I: Stress, Surgery and Community

9/25/05: **Geoffrey Cowley**, NEWSWEEK Medical Editor and **Dr. James Fonger**, Lennox Hill Hospital, New York

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In fact it may herald a whole new approach. Personal behavior may hold the secret to long-term health, but as researchers are now discovering, behavior is not just a matter of choice. Every aspect of our lifestyles—what we eat, whether we smoke, how much we exercise—is shaped by our surroundings. If you live in a subdivision, work in an office park and can't buy a stamp without getting on the interstate, going with the flow is enough to make you sick. Staying fit in such places has long been a lonely act of resistance. But as many communities are now discovering, people surrounded by walkways and bike paths tend to use them. When smoking is barred in restaurants and workplaces, people tend to quit. And when fresh, whole food is as accessible as the processed kind, people often *prefer* it. "We've spent years making the healthy choice the most difficult choice," says Ross Brownson, an epidemiologist at St. Louis University. "We need to make it the easy choice."

If good advice were enough to keep people healthy, Americans would have few worries. We've been hectored for 30 years about the rules of heart-healthy living: don't smoke, maintain a healthy weight, get 30 minutes of moderate exercise each day, eat five servings of fruit and vegetables. Yet studies suggest that only 3 percent of us follow all those recommendations. More than half of all U.S. adults are inactive; two thirds are overweight or obese. And it's not for lack of awareness. "Stop 10 people in the street," says University of Colorado nutritionist James Hill, "and all 10 of them will say, 'I wish I were more active.' The trouble is, we've engineered the physical activity out of daily life."

If you doubt that, consider some of the changes the past half century has wrought. Physically active jobs were the norm in 1950, but sedentary employment is now twice as common. The percentage of Americans living in suburbs has more than doubled during the same period (from roughly 20 percent to 50 percent), prompting dramatic

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increases in car travel and a sharp decline in walking. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, only one child in eight now walks or bikes to school each day, and the average adult spends an hour a day behind the wheel. Couple those trends with the rise of television and a surge in commercial food production (a daily surplus of 1,000 calories per person), and you've got the ingredients for a health crisis—no personal lassitude required.

But change is possible. Public agencies are now teaming up with foundations, universities and private companies to launch a new kind of health campaign—one that focuses on improving people's options instead of reforming their behavior. The goals range from updating restaurant menus to restoring mass transit, but the most visible efforts focus on making the "built environment" more conducive to walking and cycling. "We're trying to create communities where people can once again spend at least part of their lives on foot," says Marya Morris of the American Planning Association. The planners' ideal is a densely populated community where the blocks are small, the streets are on a grid (no curlicues or cul-de-sacs), residential neighborhoods are enlivened by street-front shops and services, and the sidewalks are safe and attractive. "Sidewalks help people take small steps toward being active," says Allen Deary, associate director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. "Walking even a thousand extra steps each day improves health—and people will do it if they're given the chance."

Even a car-based community can take steps to create a more foot-friendly environment. Nashville is now three years into a 10-year, \$260 million project that will expand parks and create a citywide network of bike lanes and walking paths. The initiative, seeded by a \$200,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living by Design program, also includes bike-safety classes for kids and a "walk to shop" program to get seniors out in groups. In Michigan, meanwhile, the state government is using loans, grants and tax credits to encourage "active community policies," and local officials are discovering that even modest investments, such as a painted crosswalk or an asphalt bike path, can help lure people out of their minivans. When the town of Jackson held a "smart commute" day to show off some newly opened routes last May, some 86 percent of the people who left their cars home from work were doing it for the very first time.

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