

Active Transportation

by Michael Haynes

Active Transportation encompasses all modes of conveyance that require human power. Walking, bicycling, skateboarding, and in-line skating can all be included within the active transportation definition. It can even be expanded to include less common methods of daily travel such as cross-country skiing, canoeing, and skating. Active Transportation is a term becoming increasingly well known as health professionals, urban planners, and ordinary citizens consider how to find solutions to serious health and environmental concerns.

It is becoming clear that certain escalating health problems, such as cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes, are associated with increasing levels of physical inactivity among Canadians. The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute studies show that two thirds of all Canadians are not physically active enough to achieve health benefits.

Vehicle emissions represent one of the main causes of air pollution, which directly results in an estimated 5,000 deaths each year (Health Canada). Other health problems, such as asthma, heart disease, emphysema, pneumonia, and cancer are all exacerbated or even caused by air pollution.

The promotion of active transportation represents an important means to improve Canadians' health and the environment by directly attacking these two causes of lifestyle created disease. Using motor vehicles less often, if only a few occasions each week, will have significant economic, environmental, and health benefits for us all.

Currently, an average of 6.6% of Canadians walk up to 1km of their travel to work, while another 1.2% bicycle up to 3.2km. In the most active

city in Canada, Victoria, BC, 10.4% of the population walks, and an additional 4.8% bicycle. There are compelling economic reasons for becoming more active. If all of Canada used active transportation to the levels of Victoria, the direct economic benefits are estimated at \$7 billion dollars per year.

The improved health of Canadians and reduced health care costs associated with physical inactivity, air pollution, and bodily injuries caused by motor vehicle accidents would be reduced by \$480,144,000 annually if we achieved 15.2% active transportation levels. Reduced traffic congestion savings, and improved workplace productivity from healthier employees would achieve an anticipated contribution to the economy of \$616,380,000. Other savings would come from savings for fuel, repair, maintenance, and parking of automobiles, reduced roadway costs, and even noise reduction.

If all Canadians reached the active transportation levels of Victoria, an equivalent of 3.3 million tonnes of CO₂ annually would not be emitted into the atmosphere. Each commuter who switches to active transportation could achieve nearly two-thirds of the individual goal established under Environment Canada's "One Tonne Challenge," a personal reduction of 0.64 tonnes of CO₂ in one year.

Canada does not compare favourably with other western nations in its rates of bicycling and walking. Even countries with northern climates similar to our own show much higher rates of active transportation. Mountainous Switzerland reports that 29% walk and 10% bicycle; Sweden reports that 39% walk and 10% bicycle. Only the United States shows lower levels of activity than Canada.

Even inside Canada, it is the Yukon that is tied with British Columbia for the highest percentage of commuter cyclists. Bicycle ownership is highest in Manitoba, Alberta, and Quebec. And although one in two Canadians cycles for recreational or leisure purposes, only one in four bicycles as a mode of transportation. We are much better at walking. Almost six in ten

Canadians (58%) report walking as a mode of transportation "at least sometimes".

One of the principal reasons cited for Canadians not to walk or bicycle regularly is the lack of facilities in many municipalities. Few communities have on-street bike lanes, and very few have sidewalks on both sides of major arterial roads. Few trail networks are designed to enable travelling within cities exclusively on off-road trails. However, some communities are acting to make improvements. Between 1990 and 1999, the City of Vancouver increased the length of its bicycle routes from 8.8km to 133km.

Short trips, those requiring less than thirty minutes of human powered travel time, about 2.5km walking or 8km bicycling, are ideal for Active Transportation solutions. These short trips make up a significant and disturbingly high percentage of the average Canadian's motor vehicle trips every year. Regrettably, instead of walking to the store we far too often choose to drive. And the cost of "saving" a few minutes time may be higher than we recognise.

Active Transportation is something we all can do. Start small. Over eight in ten Canadians (84%) live within a 30-minute bicycle ride of a routine destination. Once a week, for one trip to the store, or work, or school, try to walk, bike, or otherwise use your own muscles instead of a motor vehicle. And then, if that works out well, you can add additional trips later.

Who knows? It might even begin to be fun. As you become fitter you will be able to make the trip more quickly. And if the air becomes that much better because of less pollution, you might even be able to smell the flowers on your way.

For more information on Active Transportation, including an electronic copy of the document from which all these statistics were taken, "The Business Case for Active Transportation," visit Go for Green's web site, www.goforgreen.ca. X

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