

# Surgeon General's Perspectives

## MAKING OUR COMMUNITIES WALKABLE FOR OLDER ADULTS

VIVEK H. MURTHY, MD, MBA

Ever since I was a young boy, my father would wake up early and walk around our neighborhood circle for two or sometimes three miles. It was his time to exercise and think. From time to time, I would join him, and each time, I was grateful that I did. As I grew older, we would walk together and share stories about family, work, and the people I met during my travels. As life got busier for me, those walks were treasured times to reconnect. Time passed quickly and before we knew it, we had walked several miles.

My walks with my father remind me that walking has multiple benefits from both a social and health perspective for people of all ages, especially for older adults. As part of an effort leading up to the July 2015 White House Conference on Aging,<sup>1</sup> I recently hosted, with other federal officials, a listening session with experts on aging, health care, and housing.<sup>2</sup> They confirmed what we've long known: Keeping physically active is one of the best things we can do to help reduce aging-associated health risks, including early death, cancer, cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline, depression, diabetes, falls, and stroke. Physical activity can reduce pain and improve function for those with arthritis and other chronic conditions. Also, regular walking—whether around the neighborhood, at the gym, or in a mall—can help older adults maintain social ties and avoid social isolation. Decades of social research indicate that avoiding social isolation is linked with a reduced risk of morbidity,<sup>3</sup> mortality,<sup>4</sup> and institutionalization<sup>5</sup> in later life.

Even though walking is a relatively easy and low-cost way to exercise, barriers can exist, particularly for older adults. Many streets in this country are designed with cars and trucks in mind, not pedestrians. And such streets can be even less convenient if you need a walker or wheelchair. Additionally, weather that is too hot or too cold can make walking more difficult. As such, streets and other walkways need to be convenient, well-lit, safe, and accessible.

We know that older adults who live in walkable neighborhoods are more likely to engage in physical activity than those who do not. One of the goals of the National Prevention Strategy we developed in 2011 is to



Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA  
VADM, U.S. Public Health Service  
Surgeon General

make it easier for Americans of all ages and abilities to walk more as a way to increase physical activity.<sup>6</sup> Many communities around the country are taking creative approaches to encouraging walking:

- Harlem Hospital Center in New York City partners with a number of local organizations (e.g., park departments, aging offices, senior centers, universities, and faith-based groups) to host the Walk It Out! program, which provides peer-led walking clubs as well as other organized physical activities. The program's goal is "to enhance access to neighborhood spaces for physical activity and to develop informational outreach activities to promote holistic health and prevent illness among Harlem's senior citizens."<sup>7</sup>
- The Massachusetts Association of Councils on Aging recently awarded 24 Keep Moving Walking Program grants. The purpose of the awards is to create walking clubs that will engage older adults in a two- to three-day per week walking routine that will improve their health and enhance their independence. These sites aim to provide older adults with year-round access to safe indoor and outdoor physical activity spaces on town tracks, at school gyms, in retail malls, and on pedestrian/bike trails.<sup>8</sup>

- For those who want to dodge the heat, rain, or snow—or who do not have ideal walking paths near their homes—mall walking is a great alternative. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center just published “Mall Walking: A Program Resource Guide.” This excellent resource explains how malls can provide sheltered indoor places, free from crime, traffic, and extreme temperatures, which allow people of all ages and abilities to enjoy the health benefits of walking. Malls also generally have accessible bathrooms, water fountains, resting spots, and security guards, and are easy to navigate by foot or wheelchair. The guide, which was released in May 2015, gives examples of successful mall walking programs and also provides helpful strategies for anyone (i.e., mall managers, public health professionals, and community organizations) who is thinking of starting a mall walking program.<sup>9</sup>

These examples illustrate how communities are partnering with citizens, businesses, churches, health professionals, and others to increase walking opportunities for older adults.

As America's doctor, I want to encourage everyone, regardless of age, to make walking a regular part of your life. I promise to do the same by making the time to take many more walks with my father.

---

The author thanks Amanda Lehning and Diane Gianelli for their contributions to this article.

## REFERENCES

1. Department of Health and Human Services (US). White House Conference on Aging: about the conference [cited 2015 Jul 2]. Available from: URL: <http://www.whitehouseconferenceonaging.gov/about/index.html>
2. Department of Health and Human Services (US). White House Conference on Aging: healthy aging and healthy communities [cited 2015 Jul 2]. Available from: URL: <http://www.whitehouseconferenceonaging.gov/blog/post/blog-on-housing-and-healthy-aging-listening-session.aspx>
3. Tomaka J, Thompson S, Palacios R. The relation of social isolation, loneliness, and social support to disease outcomes among the elderly. *J Aging Health* 2006;18:359-84.
4. Lyyra TM, Heikkinen RL. Perceived social support and mortality in older people. *J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci* 2006;61:S147-52.
5. Gaugler JE, Duval S, Anderson KA, Kan RL. Predicting nursing home admission in the U.S.: a meta-analysis. *BMC Geriatr* 2007;7:13.
6. National Prevention Council. National Prevention Strategy: America's plan for better health and wellness. Washington: Department of Health and Human Services (US), Office of the Surgeon General; 2011. Also available from: URL: <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/priorities/prevention/strategy/report.pdf> [cited 2015 Jul 2].
7. Harlem Hospital Center. Hip Hop Stroke Center: Hip Hop Public Health Education Center [cited 2015 Jul 7]. Available from: URL: [http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/index.jsp?epi-content=RAW&wcproxyurl=http%253A%252F%252Fwww.nyc.gov%252Fhtml%252Fhhc%252Fharlem%252Fhtml%252Fservices%252Fhip-hop.shtml&beanID=2027100071&viewID=proxy\\_frameset](http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/index.jsp?epi-content=RAW&wcproxyurl=http%253A%252F%252Fwww.nyc.gov%252Fhtml%252Fhhc%252Fharlem%252Fhtml%252Fservices%252Fhip-hop.shtml&beanID=2027100071&viewID=proxy_frameset)
8. Massachusetts Association of Councils on Aging. Keep Moving fitness program [cited 2015 Jul 2]. Available from: URL: <http://www.mcoaonline.com/consumer-services/pages/keep-moving-fitness-program>
9. Belza B, Allen P, Brown DR, Farren L, Janicek S, Jones DL, et al. Mall walking: a program resource guide. Seattle: University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center; 2015. Also available from: URL: <http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/downloads/mallwalking-guide.pdf> [cited 2015 Jul 2].