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A woman walks Wednesday along a path connecting Nathan Phillips Square on the left and Queen Street West. A new report shows that walkable neighbourhoods tend to encourage better habits even among people who don't particularly value them.

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Toronto prides itself on being a city of walkable neighbourhoods. But a landmark report for the Toronto Board of Health offers fresh evidence that the residents who have the most to gain from living within strolling distance of shops and services frequently live in the city's least walkable areas.

[*The Walkable City*](#) is the kind of evidence-based research that needs to inform how new communities are built and old ones redeveloped, says Toronto Medical Officer of Health Dr. David McKeown.

“This study really gets at how the shape of your neighbourhood affects how likely you are to be getting physically active,” he said.

It focuses on utilitarian walking — the steps people take in the course of their daily business.

“A lot of the physical activity people get that contributes to their health is happening not as a recreational activity but just as a part of the activities of daily living,” McKeown said.

The report shows the most walkable neighbourhoods are clustered downtown and the least walkable are in the post-war suburbs — many of them overlapping communities that face economic and social challenges.

The findings before the Board of Health on Monday are based on a walkability index that incorporates various measures: the density of a neighbourhood, the mixture of land use and the incidence of streets that intersect on a grid versus those with long blocks and cul-de-sacs.

Included in the study was a survey of 1,525 residents in Toronto and the surrounding region. It shows that affordability was the top factor in deciding where people live.

But a significant number indicated they would be willing to trade off square footage and a bigger backyard for the convenience of walking to the local store or library.

In Toronto, 74 per cent of those surveyed said they preferred living in a walkable neighbourhood, with various kinds of housing in close proximity to shops, services and transit stops, and shorter commutes. But even 46 per cent of those living outside Toronto’s municipal borders said they preferred more walkable neighbourhoods.

Only 6 per cent of Toronto residents preferred car-oriented areas where they faced longer commutes and a drive to the store.

McKeown said the research shows that the shape of the neighbourhood can encourage people to be more active, whether or not they're living in a walkable area, because they naturally tend to physical activity.

"If people have a preference for walkable neighbourhoods, they walk more. But even people who don't have a preference for walkable neighbourhoods walk more if they live in a walkable neighbourhood," he said.

City Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker (Scarborough Centre) represents one of the least walkable areas of Toronto. He can take a two-hour walk near his home without ever stepping on a street, but he has to get into the car to buy a bunch of bananas.

"Making communities like mine more walkable is a slow, painful process. We have inherited an environment that is hostile to people walking," said De Baeremaeker.

But better-marked roads and transit improvements such as the anticipated LRT on Sheppard Ave. East are designed to encourage livelier suburban streets.

"In my ward there's not a lot of people going on first dates. Do we have that potential? Absolutely. Is it there now? Besides the McDonalds and KFC, our restaurants aren't that charming," said De Baeremaeker.

The Walkable City identifies the West Don Lands, the Black Creek area and Regent Park as communities that are being built or redeveloped with better walkability in mind.

Among the report's most important findings is the relationship between walking and body mass index (BMI). A high BMI is associated with chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

The lower the walkability score of the neighbourhood, the higher the BMI of the residents, according to the research.

But even in older suburbs, there are opportunities for improvement, said McKeown.

“For some neighbourhoods the timeframe for change is longer,” he said. “You can't change the street pattern until you redevelop the neighbourhood.”

The \$150,000 in federal funding for the report came through the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer's Coalitions Linking Action and Science for Prevention and the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

WALKING PREFERENCES

- 47% of Toronto residents prefer to live within 5 km of work or school, compared with 21% outside the city

- 53% of Torontonians prefer a neighbourhood that lets them walk, bike or take transit even if means they live on a busier street. Only

23% of GTA residents expressed

that preference

- 54% of Torontonians and 30% of regional residents prefer to be able to walk to a small or medium-size grocery store or food vendor
- Among those living in car-oriented neighbourhoods, 32% want more mixed-use streets with shops and services in walking distance; 25% would be willing to live in a neighbourhood with smaller lots if it meant a shorter commute; 25% would prefer a neighborhood with connected streets rather than cul-de-sacs to improve walkability and cut travel times.

Source: *The Walkable City*