

A: Hey David, you've come to the office on foot again! What happened to your car?

B: Nothing, Susie. I am just trying to do something good for the economy.

A: Excuse me. Did you say you walk to help improve the economy?

B: Yes indeed. You know that walking isn't just good for your health; it's also good for the economy.

A: Well can you explain that to me? It sounds weird.

B: Of course. You know, just 30 minutes of walking a day can reduce your risk of heart disease by about 35 per cent. If you reduce cardiovascular disease by 35 per cent, there'll be massive savings in relation to deaths, hospital admissions, expensive medical procedures, and keeping people well and productive in their communities. The direct medical costs are estimated at about \$1 billion per year. So, in terms of savings, the effects on the public health system are monumental.

A: Those are significant figures.

B: Another point; in addition to saving money in the public health system, urban planners and economic analysts argue that the more "walkable" your community is, the more economically viable it is.

A: What's a "walkable" community?

B: Well, basically, when it comes to the built environment in our cities and neighborhoods, what's good for health is also good for the economy, good for the environment, and good for social policy. The difference between walkable places and non-walkable places is the difference between healthy people and not-so-healthy people.

A: So in this case can we say that chronic disease is prevalent in car-dominated environments as opposed to pedestrian environments, which are very people-friendly, which encourage people to walk and talk, and to be part of the city?

B: Yes, exactly. The design of the city, and its walkability, actually produces healthier outcomes in the community.

A: But what makes a city, town or neighborhood "walkable"?

B: First of all, "walkability" refers to how conducive an area is to walking. Generally speaking, inner-city areas are more walkable than suburbs or country towns. In large Australian cities like Sydney or Melbourne, for example, walking is the predominant way to get around in the center. If you want to walk from your office to see your client, or to get a coffee, you're not jumping in your car, you're not catching a bus, you're using your feet to walk a short distance. So that about 85 per cent of the trips in the city of Melbourne are done on foot.

A: That's surprising. But David, what about the places which are less congested and less convenient, say the suburbs and the countryside? For example, I live in the countryside. I still need my car even for a very short journey, because that's the quickest way.

B: Yes, that's true, Susie. Other factors that affect walkability include traffic and road conditions, footpath options, and proximity of amenities. There's even a way to measure how walkable your neighborhood is — Walk Score.

A: Walk Score? What's that?

B: Well, it's a formula used by a website which assesses any address on a walkability score from zero to one hundred. If the score is less than fifty, it means most people aren't walking in this place. If it's above ninety, the place is called a 'Walker's Paradise'. Generally speaking, when a Walk Score is higher, levels of obesity and all the related diseases are lower.

A: But what is the relationship between the walkability of a community and the economy?

B: The studies show that businesses thrive in part from the incidental shopping from passing pedestrians. As a result, retail spending is higher in walkable areas. What's more, in communities where people walk a lot, they are nearer to things that they value. In other words, businesses become more viable, so there's a business benefit. On a broader level, according to urban economists, walking also promotes more productivity and connectivity of knowledge-based industries.

A: Well in my opinion, despite the benefits of being on foot, cars will continue to be a fixture of day-to-day life — so a pedestrian paradise may remain one step away for most of us.

B: That's true. And that's why I walk to work every day. The cities lagging behind on walkability will ultimately pay a price.

Outline: Walking isn't only good for your physical and mental health; it's also good for the economy. There is a range of studies around cost-benefit and the economic benefit of reducing heart disease through walking, with reduced spending on health provision. Many city centers are very "walkable", and a website called "Walk Score" can measure the walkability of any given area. Businesses are more viable in walkable areas as well. The more walkable an area is, the more prosperous it becomes in every sense.

Questions: Do you like walking? Why or why not? Is the place where you live "walkable"? Besides the influence on health and the economy, what other benefits can walking bring us? How should city centers balance the needs of pedestrians, cyclists or public transport?