

Walking Hard for Many Exercisers

(CNN) - Nearly one in four people in the Atlanta area are exercise enthusiasts stuck in neighborhoods without sidewalks or other walking amenities, according to a study that illustrates a problem for many Americans.

Researchers said the findings point to the need for more exercise-friendly places to live.

"The bottom line is the built environment really does matter to health," said Lawrence Frank, a University of British Columbia researcher who led the study.

Walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods have sidewalks leading to nearby shops, restaurants or other destinations. They are built in a way that makes it easier to walk and get to buses and trains. Many are older neighborhoods, located in more urban areas.

Frank is among a group of scientists who have shown that people who live in walkable neighborhoods tend to weigh less than people who live in more isolated and car-dependent areas.

"He's the first one to make a connection between land use and obesity," said Christopher Leinberger, director of the University of Michigan's real estate program.

Frank's current study examined whether a community's walkability affected obesity rates. The research showed that exercisers had a similarly low obesity rate whether they lived in walkable neighborhoods or not. It was 12 percent for those in walkable areas versus 15 percent in non-walkable neighborhoods, a difference that was not statistically significant.

Among those who prefer to drive, however, about 21.5 percent were obese, and it also didn't matter whether they lived in walkable or non-walkable neighborhoods.

The distances driven were also noted. Exercisers in walkable neighborhoods drove 26 miles a day, while those in non-walkable neighborhoods drove about 37 miles.

Among non-exercisers, those in walkable neighborhoods drove 26 miles, and compared to 43 miles in areas that were mostly car-friendly.

"Walking and driving really change a lot in different neighborhood types, regardless of people's preferences," Frank said.

The study is based on detailed surveys done in the 13-county Atlanta region in 2001-02. The results, which are being published this fall in a peer-reviewed journal, *Social Science & Medicine*, are based on responses from 1,432 people. Twenty-three percent of them were exercisers living in places more conducive to driving than walking.



People who live in walkable neighborhoods weigh less than people who don't, researchers say.

The researchers also noted that sometimes people don't end up living where they want. Some move to less pedestrian-friendly areas because of concerns about crime or schools, Frank said.

Leinberger notes that some people can't afford housing in walkable neighborhoods, where homes can cost up to three times as much as similar housing in non-walkable areas.

David Goldberg, a 44-year-old Decatur, Georgia, resident who participated in the survey, has lived in both environments. Goldberg said he was randomly selected for the study, but he also works for Smart Growth America, a nonprofit coalition that combats urban sprawl.

In the 1990s, when he was a newspaper reporter, he and his wife bought a house in Henry County, a far-flung Atlanta suburb. It was an affordable, pretty area that was a good base for work trips to southern Georgia. But there were no sidewalks in the subdivision, and the only real walking destination was a convenience store across an increasingly busy highway. The family had to drive everywhere and he put on 15 pounds, he said.

By the time of the survey, he and his family had moved to Decatur, an older suburb closer to Atlanta. They settled in a walkable area near a pleasantly busy town center.