Physical activity has many health benefits but only 57% of Albertans get enough physical activity to achieve such benefits. The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines recommend that adults, 18 to 64 years, accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity per week. The guidelines go on to suggest that more physical activity can provide greater health benefits, particularly muscle and bone strengthening activities of major muscle groups for at least two days a week.

Walking is the most popular form of physical activity for Albertans. Specifically, walking plays an important role in health promotion through chronic disease prevention. It also has a role in managing many of the following conditions:

- cardiovascular disease
- type 2 diabetes
- metabolic syndrome
- obesity
- dementia
- mental health
- osteoporosis
- certain cancers (e.g., breast and colon)

Considering these benefits combined with the popularity of walking among Albertans, it is important to be able to support this positive behaviour that is already occurring. Therefore, rather than taking a prescriptive stance to behaviour change, it is key to encourage and support the activity that Albertans already choose: walking.

The WalkABle Alberta Program

The WalkABle Alberta program, offered through Alberta Health Services (AHS), is aimed at improving health and reducing chronic disease by promoting physical activity through walking. This is achieved by working with communities to support and encourage improvements in community walkability. Community walkability can entail improvements in the built environment, such as sidewalks, trails and pedestrian support infrastructure,

Summary

Walking is a popular activity among Albertans and can provide many health benefits. However, the environments in which we live may not always be easy to walk in. This article highlights the benefits of walkability and provides an overview of the WalkABle Alberta project with community examples and the international Walk21 Calgary conference.
as well as the social environment, including safety, welcoming streets and a community culture of walking. In doing so, walking can become the easy choice for individuals. Guided by the principles of the International Charter for Walking, WalkABle Alberta, in partnership with health representatives and municipal administrators, seeks to identify key actions that improve community walkability.

WalkABle Alberta has worked with many internal AHS and external provincial organizations to support community walkability, including 19 communities throughout the province. More specifically, WalkABle Alberta:

- takes a community engagement approach working with provincial organizations and local community stakeholders;
- hosts Communities of Practice events so that communities can learn and share with each other; and
- continues to ensure that the program works toward the community’s needs by supporting new and existing community initiatives that make positive changes to community walkability.

In addition to the many health benefits of walking for individuals, communities can also see benefits to the local economy and social environment. A walkable downtown has a large economic influence. These benefits are seen in:

- store rents;
- property value — each Walk Score (https://www.walkscore.com/) point increases property values and can increase home values by $700–$3,000;
- business and the local economy — the slower we travel, the more we spend; and
- aesthetics spaces — space for people is valued more than parking space for cars thus making the street more attractive for people to spend time and money.

Social benefits of community walkability include:

- community connection among each other;
- community connection from where people live and the places they want to be; and
- safety by the reduction of traffic-related pedestrian injuries.

Actions to improve your community walkability

There are many ideas and approaches to improving community walkability. WalkABle Alberta has several ideas that can help you get started.

- Identify the existing programs that surround walkability and areas of common interest amongst groups or organizations. This can help to determine the level of capacity that your community has and the amount of interest there is on the issue.
- Engage any groups or organizations that have an interest in improving community walkability. Stakeholder engagement should take a multi-sector approach: health, municipality, county, business sector, programs/initiatives running in the community, private industry, and recreation.
• As a group, decide on actions that could be accomplished in the community and support organizational interests in improving community walkability, such as:
  - form a new or adapt an existing committee to focus on improving community walkability;
  - improve wayfinding in the community through signs and maps that promote/encourage walking;
  - organize and promote events that challenge community members to walk more;
  - encourage built environment changes to improve community walkability;
  - support initiatives that can help improve walkability; and
  - create a better link between health, the municipality, and community stakeholders to improve established walkability initiatives.

• Create a plan to evaluate your actions to measure the changes created by your actions.

Community examples

Camrose

Background: Depending on which organization (or sector) takes the lead on walkability within the community, different outcomes can occur. In some communities, such as Camrose, Alberta, the health sector leads the walkability charge for the community.

Process: Walkability began with the formation of a local committee (Walkable Camrose Committee) to address walkability recommendations provided by WalkABle Alberta.

Outcome: A plan was developed by the committee which identified priority areas:

- promote safe and healthy environments;
- increase inclusive mobility by advocating for:
  - improved accessibility;
  - safer areas for walking; and
  - more timely snow removal.
- promote well-designed spaces and places through initiatives such as Camrose Walk & Roll Week; and
- nurture and sustain a culture of walking.

The formation of the Walkable Camrose Committee and the support from WalkABle Alberta and other provincial/local authorities helped to generate action ideas and opened doors to other opportunities. Implementing recommendations from the community report resulted in new community-identified challenges, which were further synthesized into tangible and prioritized actions. Some challenges include: a lack of financial support, disjointed political will (require support from a new city council every few years), and lack of training of individuals’ awareness and knowledge of walkability. Furthermore, the Walkable Camrose Committee faced high turnover, resulting in inconsistent membership and challenges of continuity of efforts. Regardless of the challenges, Walkable Camrose continues to be committed to enhancing the walkability of their community by working together to accomplish their identified priority actions.
Okotoks

Background: In Okotoks, Alberta, walkability is led by the municipality. The Municipal Development Plan led to an active transportation ad hoc committee that was established for two years to develop an active transportation plan. This committee consisted of five Okotoks residents and a Town Councillor, with liaison support from Community Services and Planning Services staff.

Process: With a vision to create a culture for a healthy and active community, the committee planned and developed local capacity and support for multiple modes of sustainable, safe, accessible active choices connecting people to neighbourhoods, open spaces, recreation, schools, and businesses. With facilitation support from AHS WalkABle Alberta, a community report for Okotoks was developed in a 2-day community workshop.

Outcome: From the workshop, the following actions were developed and acted upon:

- installing pathway counter devices at key active transportation routes to measure use;
- conducting surveys at key locations (e.g., pathways, destinations, etc.) and online through a website;
- making presentations to various stakeholder groups, including Council committees, town staff, seniors groups, biking clubs, walking clubs, etc;
- identifying key active transportation issues and challenges in the town (e.g., missing links, barriers, maintenance, etc.); and
- developing an Active Transportation Strategy with nine goals that are integrated into new and existing community developments.

Okotoks continues to stress the importance of walkability. Data collected shows that pathway usage has increased. The usage amounts of connector to pathways provides valuable data for prioritizing future improvements. However, long-term collection is required to assess trends over time. At the same time, ongoing community consultation continues to occur to ensure the municipal administration understands and listens to the community members’ wants and needs, especially in redeveloping neighbourhoods, where community member input is necessary in making efficient and effective community changes. Finally, community champions working with the town’s staff and elected officials create the best way to implement and share successes of the town’s active transportation strategy.

More information about these and other communities can be found at: ahs.ca/walk.

Walk21 Calgary Conference

A great opportunity to learn more about improving community walkability is the International Walk21 Conference, hosted in Calgary from Sept 19–22, 2017. The conference encourages provincial and international delegates to learn and share unique walkability strategies. Delegates include academics, citizens, policy-makers, urban planners, healthcare professionals, and local leaders who are promoting healthy and walkable communities. Walk21 Calgary offers plenary sessions, symposia, breakouts, and walkshops in downtown and suburban Calgary. In learning from provincial, national, and international experts, we will only make our communities more healthy and walkable. Learn more about the conference at www.ucalgary.ca/walk21calgary/.

Useful Links

- Alberta Health Services Community Walkability (www.ahs.ca/walk)
- Walk21 Conference in Calgary (www.ucalgary.ca/walk21calgary/)
- Walk21 (www.walk21.com/)
- Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines (www.csep.ca/CMFiles/Guidelines/CSEP_PAGuidelines_adults_en.pdf)
- Benefits of Physical Activity (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pa-ap/02paap-eng.php)
- Tips of Being more Physically Active (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/hl-mvs/pa-ap/07paap-eng.php)
- Population Health Approach (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/approach-approche/index-eng.php)
- Health Promotion Model (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/php3-eng.php)
- Alberta Centre for Active Living (www.centre4activeliving.ca/)
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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References