

Walk, don't drive! Community promotion of physical activity has 2-fold benefit | Science Blog

FAIRFAX, Va., August 3, 2009 -- About half of the car trips in the U.S. are less than five miles -- a distance easily navigated by walking or cycling. Reducing short-distance car trips has many benefits -- it decreases car accidents, has positive benefits for the environment and increases physical health and activity, says communication professor Edward Maibach of George Mason University. An expert in climate change communication research, Maibach says that community leaders should make promotion of physical activity a priority.

"There are lots of proven low-cost options that communities can use to encourage people to get out of their cars and walk or ride instead," he says. "Use of these options helps people remain healthy (by promoting physical activity and reducing obesity) and helps reduce heat-trapping pollutants that cause global warming."

In a recent article in the journal *Preventative Medicine*, Maibach suggests that policy makers and government officials at all levels should look at communication, marketing and policy enhancements that can be implemented with relative ease to promote active transport.

Maibach cites the Web site Active Living by Design (<http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/>) as showcasing many examples of successful programs such as city-bike sharing, customized walking or cycling maps and grassroots campaigns.

"One of my favorite examples is 'walking school buses' in which children and a few parents walk together to the local school," says Maibach.

He also suggests policy changes such as reducing speed limits, giving cyclists priority at intersections and closing some roads to cars, can also encourage people to consider alternative ways of commuting.

"There is no one magic bullet. All of these examples can be effective here in the U.S., and all should be implemented in as many communities as possible. The more that are implemented, the more we will wean people away from sole reliance on their cars when they could be walking and/or riding, and improving their health as a result."

Maibach is the director of the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University. His work over the past 25 years has helped define the fields of public health communication and social marketing, and his book, *Designing Health Messages: Approaches from Communication Theory and Public Health Practice*, is widely used by academics and practitioners alike.

About George Mason University

Named the #1 national university to watch by U.S. News & World Report, George Mason University is an innovative, entrepreneurial institution with global distinction in a range of academic fields. Located in the heart of Northern Virginia's technology corridor near Washington, D.C., Mason prepares its students to succeed in the work force and meet the needs of the region and the world. With strong undergraduate and graduate degree programs in engineering and information technology, dance, organizational psychology and health care, Mason students are routinely recognized with national and international

scholarships. Mason professors conduct groundbreaking research in areas such as cancer, climate change, information technology and the biosciences, and Mason's Center for the Arts brings world-renowned artists, musicians and actors to its stage.

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