

Health Benefits



During the past four decades, obesity levels in the United States have risen dramatically. The rates of chronic disease — including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, some types of cancer, sleep disorders, joint pains, mental illness and depression — have similarly risen while the amount of physical activity that Americans participate in has steadily decreased. Fortunately, cycling offers a low-impact form of physical activity that appeals to a wide range of the population. Cycling and the implementation of bicycle routes can help:

Reduce Health Risks and Improve Well-Being

Each year in the United States, sedentary lifestyles are estimated to contribute to as many as 255,000 preventable deaths. Scientific studies have shown that moderate levels of physical activity provide clear health benefits.¹ Endurance types of physical activity, such as cycling, reduce the risk of developing obesity, osteoporosis, and depression;² such activities may improve quality of life and psychological well being.¹

Increase Access and Options for Safe Physical Activity

Bicycling is a form of physical activity that can be done throughout much of one's lifespan. The initial investment is relatively low, and the opportunity and access to bicycling is greater than many other forms of physical activity.

Sedentary lifestyles are often prevalent when options for physical activity are limited. Environments that facilitate active lifestyles are desirable because of the health benefits of physical activity.³ By linking urban, suburban, and rural areas through signed, mapped routes, the U.S. Bicycle Route System hopes to incentivize bicycle travel and thereby increase physical activity.

Increase Safety for Bicyclists

A number of studies have also shown that as both the amount of bicycle infrastructure and the number of bicyclists increase, bicycle fatality rates decrease.^{4, 5}

Promote Physical Activity in Underserved Communities

By utilizing existing infrastructure and improving safety along long-distance corridors, the U.S. Bicycle Route System can help provide safe and accessible locations for cycling in a wide range of communities. Rural communities are especially underserved for health or recreation facilities, making cycling routes and safety investments particularly valuable.⁶

Provide Significant Cost Savings for Public Agencies, Private

Companies, and Individuals

Switching to walking or cycling can provide a significant cost savings through increased physical health, decreased chronic diseases, and long-range improvements in public health expenditures.⁷ Studies from the United States, Europe, and New Zealand have all demonstrated that moving from inactivity to moderate walking or cycling distances have improved individuals' physical health and in some cases decreased public expenditures by several thousand dollars annually.

Related Research

[Sharing the Road: Optimizing Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety and Vehicle Mobility](#) is a report from the Michigan DOT that found sidewalks reduce pedestrian crashes by 88%, while adding shoulders reduce pedestrian crashes by 70%; road diets reduce all crashes anywhere from 14% to 49%; raised medians reduce all crashes by 40% and by as much as 69% at unsignalized intersections; and that bike lanes can reduce bicycle crashes by 50%.

1) Hahn et al. 1990 and Powell and Blair 1994 in Department of Health and Human Services, Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General. CDC, Atlanta, GA. 1996; 2) Saris et al. 2003; Landers and Arent 2001; 3) Transportation Research Board Special Report 282. Does the Built Environment Influence Physical Activity? Examining the Evidence (Transportation Research Board, Washington, D.C. 2005. www.TRB.org); 4) Alliance for Biking & Walking. Bicycling and Walking in the United States 2010 Benchmarking Report. Washington, D.C., 2010; 5) Jacobsen, P.L., Safety in Numbers: More Walkers and Bicyclists, Safer Walking and Bicycling (Injury Prevention, 9, 2003, pp. 205–209); 6) Casey, Alicia A., et al. Impact of the food environment and physical activity environment on behaviors and weight status in rural U.S. communities. (Preventive Medicine 47. 600–604. 2008); 7) Littman, Todd. Quantifying the Benefits of Nonmotorized Transportation For Achieving Mobility Management Objectives. (Victoria Transport Policy Institute, September 2009). Retrieved from <http://www.vtpi.org/nmt-tdm.pdf>.