

Physical activity by stealth NOT health

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The Government sees active travel to work as a convenient way of building activity into lifestyle and an important public health strategy. A new study suggests that transport plans aimed at reducing car usage should be considered as a feasible and effective strategy for increasing physical activity among the workforce and improving health.

The paper, *Physical activity by stealth? The potential health benefits of a workplace transport plan* by Rowan Brockman and Professor Ken Fox from Bristol University's Centre of Exercise, Nutrition and Health Sciences within the School for Policy Studies is published online in *Public Health*.

There are few published evaluations of the effects of travel policy on health-enhancing physical activity. However, the University of Bristol Travel Survey, of around 2,500 employees, has been conducted every

two years since 1998 and provided an opportunity for the researchers to identify trends in walking, cycling and use of the car.

The study found that walking and cycling among employees showed a year on year increase between 1998 and 2007. In total, walking increased from 19 to 30 per cent and cycling more modestly from seven to 12 per cent. Over the same period, use of the car to travel to work reduced from 50 to 32 per cent. The respondents who usually walked or cycled to work achieved greater than 80 per cent of the recommended guidelines for physical activity through their active commuting.

Rowan Brockman, a British Heart Foundation research student, said: "This study shows that a workplace transport plan, even if it is not designed to improve health, can have a very important effect on increasing physical activity in employees. We were impressed that most of those who were walking or cycling to work were achieving weekly amounts associated with substantial health benefit."

Ken Fox, Professor of Exercise and Health Sciences and who advises Government on obesity and physical activity strategy, said: "It is not easy changing health behaviours. The Bristol University travel strategy looks as though it has been at least as successful as many interventions aimed more directly at increasing activity, such as exercise referral schemes.

"It seems this may be an example of what the current Secretary of State for Health means by a 'nudge'. The travel plan has prompted many people to consider walking or cycling as a more feasible alternative to the car. In the process they are probably receiving important health benefits."

The University of Bristol Travel Plan was set up to persuade employees to leave their cars at home and travel to work by other means, largely because of the very limited availability of parking space. As a result, it

seems to have had a very important impact on travelling to work on foot or by bike and the amounts of activity achieved as a result are enough to provide significant health benefit.

Promoting participation in regular, moderate intensity physical activity is a public health priority in the UK. [Physical activity](#) guidelines suggest that for substantial health benefit people need to be taking part in moderately intensive (equivalent of brisk walking) activity on five or more days of the week.

More information: Physical activity by stealth? The potential health benefits of a workplace transport plan by Rowan Brockman and K. R. Fox, Centre for Exercise, Nutrition and Health Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK. *Public Health* [available online](#) 5 April 2011.

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