

New study finds overall physical activity is increased by proximity to routes

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(Medical Xpress)—The provision of new, high-quality, traffic-free cycling and walking routes in local communities has encouraged more people to get about by foot and by bike, according to a new study published today in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Two years after new routes were developed by charity Sustrans with local authority partners, people living nearby increased their total levels of physical activity, compared to those living further away.

People living 1km (0.6 miles) from the new routes had increased their

time spent walking and cycling by an average of 45 minutes per week more than those living 4km (2.5 miles) away.

This could make a substantial contribution to helping people achieve the two and a half hours of physical activity per week recommended by health experts.

Independent research led by the MRC Epidemiology Unit at the University of Cambridge, on behalf of the iConnect consortium, surveyed adults living in three communities before and after they benefited from a national initiative led by the sustainable transport charity Sustrans, and funded by the Big Lottery Fund, to build or improve walking and cycling routes at 84 towns, cities and villages around the UK.

Crucially, there was no evidence that the gains in walking and cycling were offset by reductions in other forms of physical activity. This suggests that the new routes have encouraged local people to become more active overall. The benefits were equally spread between men and women and between adults of different ages and social groups. However, people without access to a car were more likely to increase their activity levels than those who had a car.

Dr Anna Goodman, lecturer at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and lead author of the paper, said: "These findings support the case for changing the environment to promote physical activity by making walking and cycling safer, more convenient and more attractive. The fact that we showed an increase in overall levels of [physical activity](#) is very important, and shows that interventions of this sort can play a part in wider [public health](#) efforts to prevent diabetes, heart disease and other chronic conditions."

Dr David Ogilvie of the MRC Epidemiology Unit at the University of

Cambridge, who led the study, added: "Although it may seem intuitive that improving facilities for walking and cycling will help make the population more active, this has rarely been tested in practice, and most of the existing studies have been done in other parts of the world. This is one of the first studies to show that changing the environment to support walking and cycling in the UK can have measurable benefits for public health. It is also notable that we did not see a significant effect on activity until two-year follow-up. It can take time for the benefits of this sort of investment to be fully realised."

Malcolm Shepherd, Chief Executive of charity Sustrans who implemented the three projects with support from the Big Lottery Fund, said: "It's clear that when good quality infrastructure exists people use it. Our experience from co-ordinating the National Cycle Network, which saw an amazing three quarters of a billion (748 million) journeys in 2013, 7% more than the year before, has shown us this over and over again."

"With a physical inactivity crisis and traffic jams clogging our towns and cities the case has never been stronger for governments to guarantee dedicated funding for quality walking and cycling routes for everyone."

Peter Ainsworth, Chair of the Big Lottery Fund added: "In 2007, Sustrans' Connect2 project won the public TV vote to bring £50 million from the Big Lottery Fund to communities across the UK to create networks for everyday journeys for people travelling by foot or bike. The study released today showcases brilliantly the long lasting benefits that this transformational funding is achieving in creating greener, healthier, fitter and safer communities."

The three communities studied were in Cardiff, where the centrepiece of the project was a new traffic-free bridge across Cardiff Bay; Kenilworth in Warwickshire, where a new traffic-free bridge was built across a busy

trunk road to link the town to a rural greenway; and Southampton, where a new boardwalk was built along the shore of the tidal River Itchen. All of these new crossings then linked into extensive networks of routes.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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