

# Improving health, one step at a time

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Samantha Hajna (study first author) who work under the supervision of Dr. Kaberi Dasgupta, RI-MUHC researcher, and Dr. Nancy Ross from McGill's Department of Geography. Credit: McGill University Health Centre

It may be surprising, but Canadians who live in densely-populated areas where stores, banks, schools and other services are close by do not walk as much as they should. These are the findings of new research,

published in the current issue of *BMJ Open*, by a team at the Research Institute of the McGill University Health Centre (RI-MUHC). This cross-sectional analysis of a large sample of Canadians was unique in combining objective measures of physical activity with digital map based measures of walkable neighbourhoods.

"We have walkable neighbourhoods in many towns and cities in Canada, but they have to actually be used to help us reduce our risks of developing chronic conditions like type 2 diabetes and its associated complications," says study senior author, Dr. Kaberi Dasgupta, MUHC internal medicine physician and an associate professor of medicine at McGill University. "It is a little bit like having a treadmill in our basement. The treadmill is a great tool for keeping fit, as long as it is used."

The research was based on data from the Canada Health Measures Survey in which nearly 3,000 adults from 15 sites across Canada answered a questionnaire about their daily utilitarian walking (i.e. walking with a purpose, such as to the bus stop or the grocery store) and wore accelerometers that measured their number of daily steps. The researchers used latitude and longitude information combined with digital maps to calculate how walkable participants' neighbourhoods were.

"Daily step counts include both utilitarian and recreational walking and are a good indicator of total [physical activity](#)," explains study first author, Samantha Hajna, who is a PhD candidate in the Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Occupational Health at McGill University. "Contrary to our expectations, our study showed that although people living in more walkable neighbourhoods report more utilitarian walking, they are not more active overall compared to people living in less walkable neighbourhoods. Their total number of daily steps remains below the recommended 10,000 steps a day. This is different

from studies in Belgium, Czech Republic or Japan, where living in more walkable neighbourhoods is associated with [walking](#) more overall."

According to Dr. Dasgupta, the walkability of our environment should be that extra opportunity for integrating activity into our day. "If we live in a walkable neighborhood we should take advantage of it, because it can contribute to our total physical activity."

**More information:** Samantha Hajna et al. Neighbourhood walkability, daily steps and utilitarian walking in Canadian adults, *BMJ Open* (2015). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2015-008964](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2015-008964)

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