



Minnesota's Parks, Trails, and Public Health

National health trends are taking their toll on Minnesota physically and financially. Health care spending in Minnesota consumes \$38.2 billion annually, or roughly 13.6% of the gross state product. That breaks down to \$7,145 per Minnesotan.

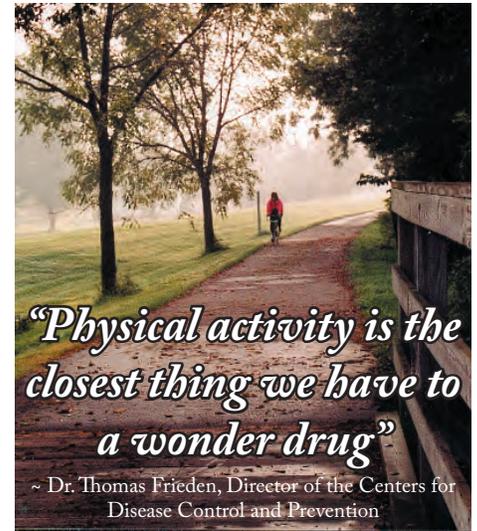
Despite the massive spending on health care, Minnesota's health trends are troubling. Especially concerning is the incidence of preventable chronic diseases related to unhealthy weight. The majority of adult Minnesotans are either overweight (37.3%) or obese (25.7%), over a fifth of Minnesota high-school students are overweight or obese, two-in-five adults are diabetic or pre-diabetic, one-in-eight hospitalizations in Minnesota are principally for cardiovascular disease events such as heart disease and stroke, and the average Minnesotan lost nearly 3 days per month to poor physical or mental health. The Minnesota Department of Health estimates

over 50% of deaths are caused by preventable chronic diseases.

In tough financial times, these diseases are burdening Minnesota. Persons who are obese have medical costs that are \$1,429 higher than those of normal weight, and in sum, obesity costs Minnesota an extra \$1.8 billion every year. Future projections are bleak: if current trends go unchecked, nearly 55% of Minnesotans will be obese by 2030. But there is reason for optimism. Reducing the average Body Mass Index in Minnesota by as little as 5% could save \$4 billion over 10 years and \$11 billion over 20 years.

A low-cost prescription for our health crisis

Physical activity is one of the easiest, effective, and most inexpensive ways of improving health. Even moderate, weekly exercise decreases the risk for many of the most costly medical conditions such as weight control, stroke, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, falls



and hip fractures, depression, and certain types of cancer.

Unfortunately, not enough Minnesotans are physically active. Only 21% of Minnesota adults meet physical activity guidelines, and 19% don't get any physical activity at all. Sedentary life styles are costly: researchers estimate physical inactivity is a leading contributor of premature death, accounting for 22% of coronary heart disease, 22% of colon cancer, 18% of osteoporosis-related fractures, 12% of diabetes and hyper-tension, and 5% of breast cancer. Encouraging physical activity, then, is crucial to improving Minnesota's health.

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Minnesota's rates of chronic diseases are troubling

- The majority of adult Minnesotans are either overweight or obese.
- Obesity costs Minnesota an extra \$1.8 billion every year.
- Two-in-five adults are diabetic or pre-diabetic.
- Minnesotans average nearly 3 poor physical or mental health days per month.
- Half of deaths are attributable to preventable chronic diseases.

The high cost of physical inactivity in Minnesota

- Only 21% of Minnesota adults meet physical activity guidelines, and 19% don't get any physical activity at all.
- Nationally, physical inactivity accounts for 22% of coronary heart disease, 22% of colon cancer, 18% of osteoporosis-related fractures, 12% of diabetes, and 5% of breast cancer.
- Reducing the average Body Mass Index in Minnesota by as little as 5% could save \$11 billion over 20 years.

Minnesota's parks and trails are part of the solution

- Physical fitness is one of the primary reasons people use parks and trails.
- Minnesota counties with higher concentrations of parks and trails tend to have lower levels of physical inactivity and obesity.
- Communities that offer parks and trails along with educational outreach can increase the percentage of people who exercise three times or more per week by 25%



Minnesota's Parks, Trails, and Public Health, *continued from front*

Parks and trails provide affordable opportunities for physical activity

Physical fitness is a primary motivation for visiting and using parks and trails. Over half of visitors to Minnesota's state parks report visiting for exercise and healthy-living, and over four-fifths of visitors report fully attaining their fitness and/or health goal. Similarly, on Minnesota's state trails, 9 out of 10 non-motorized trail users indicate being physically active is an important reason for using the trail.

The motivation to be physically active in parks and along trails translates into healthy outcomes. Researchers at the University of Minnesota have found counties with more parkland and non-motorized trails have lower rates of physical inactivity and obesity, and further, non-motorized trails are a significant predictor of physical activity and healthy weight among Minnesota's youth. Studies in North Carolina and Oregon have documented similar results.



Neighborhood studies consistently show that trails close-to-home are associated with increased trail use, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "strongly recommends" the building of amenities such as trails as a means to increase physical activity. Just retrofitting trails and improving connectivity can increase rates of physical activity. From a cost-benefit approach, investing in parks and trails is an easy choice. Not only do parks and trails encourage physical activity, the realized health savings outweigh

the financial costs.

Parks and trails offer a tremendous opportunity to improve health and reduce preventable health-care costs in Minnesota. Currently, only 24% of Minnesotans strongly agree their neighborhoods offer low-cost recreation facilities such as parks and walking trails, and only 21% strongly agree that bike trails are accessible in their neighborhood. Increasing and maintaining access to such recreation opportunities is paramount to improving the standard of life in Minnesota.

Resources

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