

Modern communities are killing us

Doctors cite heavy traffic, lack of sidewalks for poor health

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OAKLAND — Here's what happens when you don't have sidewalks in your community, your city streets are six lanes wide and choked with traffic, and you're guzzling a cola and burger from the drive-thru en route to the mall:

You get fat, you get diabetes and lose your feet to gangrene, you get depressed, your kids get fat, too, and your quality of life — not great to begin with — gets even worse.

It doesn't have to be that way, but it's the direction current growth and planning efforts have carried American society, a growing number of health officials say.

"We Americans are passing on our chance to be fit," said Dr. Richard Jackson, an adjunct professor of both Environmental Health Science and City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley. "We're in communities that make it very hard to walk or bike."

A growing body of evidence ties increasing rates of diabetes, cancer, obesity, asthma and other health problems to land use, transportation and community design. Put differently: Sprawl kills.

Just the existence of sidewalks, for instance, can drop a community's obesity rate. Ditto for dense, transit-oriented homes and workplaces.

On Friday, for the first time in perhaps a century, Bay Area planners and public health officials gathered in Oakland to discuss how to guide growth with the aim of improving health.

The trends, with a few bright exceptions, mostly point away from improved health.

Obesity rates continue to leapfrog: The average Californian has gained 10 pounds in the past 10 years. Some 10 percent of Californians — 3.5 million people — will develop diabetes.

We spend four times as much time driving as we did a generation ago, with automobile accidents the leading cause of death in America for anyone between the ages of 3 and 33.

Doctors, meanwhile, report a 20 percent jump in the number of people who complain that they "feel poorly" in the past two decades.

The typical patient for a family practitioner, said Jackson, the state's former chief medical officer, is a middle-aged man complaining of "low energy" who is overweight, has low blood sugar, high blood pressure and signs of depression.

The proper prescription would be to wake an hour earlier and exercise, and to walk more, Jackson said. But there's no time for that.

So the patient ends up on \$400 worth of medication: drugs for hypertension, antidepressants, low blood sugar, maybe even Viagra.

"This is the modern American patient," said Jackson during the keynote speech at a joint meeting between

roughly 100 Bay Area planners and public health officials.

This doesn't absolve individual behavior, health officials say. But so often the individual's patterns and choices are reinforced and limited by the "built environment": the houses we live in, the roads we commute on, the shopping centers and schools we can't walk to.

Paul Zykofsky directs land use and transportation programs at the Local Government Commission, a Sacramento-based nonprofit assisting cities with smart growth. He recalls the day he visited an elementary school class in Chico. Of the 25 children in the class, none walked to school that day.

"The walk to school has disappeared," he said.

In 1974, two-thirds of all children in California walked to school. In 2000, just 13 percent did. And that's not just from laziness. Districts have consolidated and cut back over that period, so that the number of small neighborhood schools today is 30 percent of what existed in the 1970s.

There are bright spots: Hercules and Mountain View are building narrower streets in a bid to slow traffic and encourage pedestrians, Zykofsky said. Davis and Southern California's Brea find that putting stores and housing on the same street enlivens neighborhoods.

Change is slow in the world of urban planning, Neighborhoods last many decades. But the fastest way to turn around many trends starts with the schools.

Develop safe walking routes, and kids will use them, both Jackson and Zykofsky said. Marin County has focused on this recently; it has seen a 64 percent increase in the number of children walking to school and a 114 percent jump in bike riding.

"I want every parent, when they go to buy their first house, to be demanding ... places for their children to safely walk and play," Jackson said.

"These are generational changes," he added. "But the first step would be in some ways to go back to the old model with our schools."

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