

# TRAILS PROMOTE HEALTH



**TRAILS SUPPORT WALKING AS A NO COST, EASY ACCESS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY** While multi-use trails accommodate many types of physical activity, including for those with mobility impairments, walking is the most common form of exercise for people in the United States and the predominant activity on many multi-use trails. Walking is considered a powerful public health strategy due its accessibility for people of all ages and incomes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).



**TRAILS REDUCE BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SUCH AS COST, ACCESS, AND CONVENIENCE** (Wang et al, 2004). The presence or use of trails appears to increase physical activity in adults in rural communities (Frost et al, 2010) and proximity to a trail increases the likelihood of use (Troped et al, 2001). The benefits of physical activity for overall health include preventing or decreasing the risk of diabetes, obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease, preventing risk of injury, increasing muscle tone, flexibility, joint and bone strength as well as immune health (CDC, 2020).



**TRAILS INCREASE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AMONG POPULATIONS WHO ARE AT HIGH RISK FOR INACTIVITY** Those most likely to report increased activity through the use of a trail are residents who were not regular walkers, those with a high school education or less, or those with incomes of less than \$15,000 (Brownson et al, 2000). Research suggests that users who were new to exercising and new to trail use reported greater improvements in physical activity behavior than habitual trail users. New exercisers were also more dependent on the trail as a principal place to engage in physical activity (Gordon et al, 2004).



**TRAILS POSITIVELY IMPACT MENTAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH** (Kuo, 2011; Wood et al, 2016, Gladwell et al, 2013). Walking on trails or in parks contributes to enhanced social networking, connectivity and companionship, and an increased appreciation of nature (Barton et al, 2009; Peacock et al, 2007; Pretty et al. 2007). Additionally, exercising for as little as five minutes in green spaces increases self-esteem and mood with greater effects among young people (Harvard Medical School, 2009; Barton & Pretty, 2010; Coon et al., 2011).



**HEALTH BENEFITS OF TRAILS ARE NOT EXPERIENCED UNIVERSALLY** Barriers such as marginalization, unequal access to opportunity, ethnic or subcultural differences, and discrimination may prevent low-income, people of color, and other communities from reaping the health benefits of trails and trail-based activities (Thomas, 2019). Interest in and use of trails, and the benefits that these users enjoy may be affected by an individual's proximity, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, accessibility and connectivity, perceptions of safety, and programming.



**TRAILS THAT ARE SEPARATED FROM MOTOR TRAFFIC CONTRIBUTE TO OVERALL SAFETY OUTCOMES FOR ALL USERS** (Marshall & Ferenchak, 2019). Pedestrians and bicyclists are safest when they are accommodated in transportation design and complete streets (Smart Growth America, 2016).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**ANIMATE TRAILS WITH PROGRAMS:** The greatest economic benefits occur when trails are *used*. Programs may include community-based fitness events, walk-with-a-doc programs, or social media campaigns.

**INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF TRAILS:** The public should have access to descriptions of trails, with photos and interactive maps.

**ENGAGE PEOPLE NOT CURRENTLY USING TRAILS:** Community leaders should engage both existing and potential users in meaningful decision making with a focus on people of color and low-income populations.

# CASE STUDY: GET HEALTHY CT WALK n' TALK WITH A DOC

Walk n' Talk with a Doc brings community members and healthcare providers together each week to engage in one hour, two mile walks along the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail in the Newhallville neighborhood of New Haven, Connecticut. Newhallville is a neighborhood with a rich entrepreneurial history but in recent decades, residents have suffered from persistent poverty and poor health outcomes. Physician volunteers join the walks to provide useful health information. The walks aim to bring the community together through a free, healthy activity, help participants become more comfortable talking to their own physicians in an informal, non-clinical setting, and provide an opportunity for physicians to get to know the community where their patients live. The program started in 2016 as a result of Get Healthy CT and walks are led by a partnership between Yale New Haven Hospital and the Yale Primary Care Internal Medicine and Medicine/Pediatrics Residency programs. "To be part of this group all you had to do was walk. For a few months each year we created a ...'fitness mutual aid society' that became surprisingly intimate as people celebrated milestones, and commiserated about their lives, families, and health. Several of us made friends and/or stayed in touch with fellow walkers." - Ann Greene, Walk and Talk with a Doc participant. [www.gethealthyct.org](http://www.gethealthyct.org)



As communities throughout the U.S. and the world cope with the devastating toll of COVID-19, the pandemic has brought a renewed focus on the importance of local trails. The Trail Impact Series explores how local trails are vital assets for improving physical and mental health, building community, stimulating economies, and fostering climate resilience. The goal is to provide community leaders, trail planners, and advocates with evidence-based information on the benefits of trails, and recommendations for advancing informed design, policy and programming. To view the series visit: [www.cttrailcensus.uconn.edu/trail-impact-series](http://www.cttrailcensus.uconn.edu/trail-impact-series)

Above Image: Walk and Talk with a Doc participants on the Farmington Canal Trail in New Haven, Connecticut. Photo Credit: Andrew Orefice, Program Coordinator, Yale New Haven Health.

