

BY KEN KRAUSE

## Yet another walking benefit to be mindful of: brain gain

The physical health benefits of moderate exercise such as walking are well-documented. Walking strengthens your heart, lungs, muscles and energy level while burning calories and building bone. But did you know that walking also benefits cognition? A growing body of research shows that walking aids mental processes such as thinking, reasoning, speaking and, especially, remembering.

The Harvard School of Public Health led one of the first studies to explore this relationship, tracking more than 18,000 women over a period of 8 to 15 years. When the women reached age 70, their attention, memory and learning were tested over another 2 years. Researchers found that women who walked at an easy pace 2 to 3 hours/week performed significantly better on cognition tests than women who walked less than an hour a week.

“In addition to studies showing a reduced risk of heart disease, pulmonary disease and diabetes, a moderate level of walking also appeared to reduce the rate of cognitive decline in our study,” said Dr. Jennifer Weuve, its lead author. “What is most striking is that for older women who are able to engage in several hours per week of physical activity, their cognitive function seemed to be comparable to that of a woman several years younger.”

And the benefit crosses gender. A smaller 2004 University of Virginia study on Alzheimer’s disease, titled “Walking and Dementia in Physically Capable Elderly Men,” found that those who walked less than a quarter-mile a day were almost twice as likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease or other forms of dementia as men who walked more than two miles daily.

Since these findings, numerous other studies have identified a relationship between walking and improved mental health. A meta-analysis of 18 studies published in Psychological Science in 2009 concluded that a variety of physical exercise programs substantially improved executive function — things like planning, scheduling, dealing with ambiguity, working memory and multitasking.

One major reason for the benefit to the brain is that physical activity increases blood flow to the brain and decreases blood pressure and the risk of other conditions that constrict blood flow to the brain. The brain needs strong blood flow to stay healthy. Even though the brain is only about 2% of the total body weight in humans, it receives 15%-20% of the body’s blood supply. Strong cerebral blood flow = strong brain.

A University of Pittsburgh and University of Illinois 2011 study found that people who took part in a regular walking program saw an increase in size of the hippocampus, the brain area involved in memory. The hippocampus tends to shrink slightly with age, and that is what occurred with study group members who only did stretching exercises and no walking.

Walkers in that study also showed increased connectivity in parts of another brain circuit which aids in the performance of complex tasks.

The bottom line? “If you stay physically active, you’re buying protection for your brain,” said Dr. Eric Larson of the Group Health Cooperative in Seattle.

BY JOE CUTRUFO

## Snow guide: removal tools & techniques keep city safe

Last year snowfall was a huge challenge for pedestrians. By January’s end the Boston area had reached 67 inches — the third snowiest winter on record. With a grant from The Herman and Frieda L. Miller Foundation, WalkBoston has identified successful techniques for better sidewalk snow removal and improved our understanding of municipal ordinances on snow clearance.

In 2011, WalkBoston traveled widely to discuss snow removal and to learn how municipalities are dealing with it. WalkBoston presented at the following: Walk21 conference in Vancouver, Southern New England regional conference of the American Planning Association in Providence, and the American Public Health Association’s national conference in Washington, D.C.

Partly as a result of this tour of conferences, WalkBoston has created a “snow guide” that documents initiatives in various cities. One example is the volunteer Snow

Corps in Chicago who shovel seniors’ sidewalks. Another is Portland, Maine, where volunteers adopt bus stops that they clear of snow throughout winter. Locally, Cambridge parking control officers now can write citations for property owners who fail to remove snow and ice from their sidewalks. Boston residents can use a smartphone app that allows users to take a photo to pinpoint the location of a violation.

The goal of the WalkBoston guide is twofold: to help residents advocate better for snow removal and to give local communities ideas for how to approach this problem.

For example WalkBoston suggested to Somerville’s Mayor Joe Curtatone that he focus on access to transit. The Mayor asked local businesses to shovel the bus stops their customers use, since snow removal will make it easier for customers to patronize local businesses.

## WalkBoston’s new mission & tagline reflect our “state”

In order to better reflect the statewide work WalkBoston does, we’ve adjusted our tagline from “Making communities more walkable” to **“Making Massachusetts more walkable.”** We have also revised our Mission Statement to reflect the variety of work we do, and developed talking points for members to explain our organization’s work: **WalkBoston makes walking safer and easier in Massachusetts to encourage better health, a cleaner environment and vibrant communities.**

- Our education and advocacy programs give voice to people to make their communities more walkable.
- Working with government agencies, we influence state and local transportation policies and designs.
- We develop and implement innovative programs that address social and physical barriers to walking.
- Our work especially benefits those who depend on walking the most: people with lower incomes, seniors and children, and people with disabilities.

# Boston

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## come to our party

March 22nd @ 4 — 8 pm

WalkBoston Annual Celebration

4:00:Kendall Sq. Walk | Kendall T

5:30:Reception | NERD Center

One Memorial Dr., Cambridge

6:30:Golden Shoe Awards

7:00: Speaker: U.S. Surgeon General,

Dr. Regina Benjamin

**The U.S. Surgeon General will lead the walk** and discuss ways in which walking and physical activity are becoming more integrated into the urban environment. Teens from Roxbury and East Boston will point out Complete Street components they advocate for in their neighborhoods, and David Dixon will discuss how Cambridge is creating a built environment for Kendall Square that is walkable and vibrant.

## city apps

On Feb. 1, techies and novices alike gathered to learn about the transportation world’s newest apps, or as Jeff Mooney [SeeClickFix] refers to them “the gateway drugs to civic engagement.” Jeff explained how technology makes it effortless for citizens to report a problem and see city officials respond. Nigel Jacob [New Urban Mechanics] showed how Citizens Connect encourages Bostonians to help maintain safe walkable neighborhoods. Andy Money connected entrepreneurship and open information with his MBTAinfo.com, making catching the bus painless. Reporting systems are allowing citizens to communicate with government the way that they communicate with their friends.

## walk talk

**Obesity is expensive**

25% of Canadian adults are obese, and it costs the country \$12 billion a year to treat the chronic diseases connected with obesity. Meanwhile, it’s becoming known that “a walkable neighbourhood with shops and grocers near homes slashes the probability of obesity by 35%.” The Globe & Mail, Nov. 27, 2011

**Run vs. walk**

Walking a mile burns 20% less calories than running a mile. This may look disappointing and encourage you to run unless taken in the context of everyday life. People complain about having too little time to exercise, that’s why walking to a destination whenever possible is recommended.

## casey overpass

WalkBoston is a member of the Working Advisory Group (WAG) on reconstruction of the Casey Overpass in Jamaica Plain. Our recommendation is to not replace the structure but build an at-grade solution. Overpasses and the spaces beneath are uninviting and discourage pedestrian movement. An at-grade boulevard would offer better sight lines and safer and more convenient connections to the Emerald Necklace parks. MassDOT is expected to choose—overpass or at-grade—soon. Many design details are not yet worked out, and we will continue working with WAG and the City of Boston to ensure the best possible conditions for the community and pedestrians.

# 2.12 mental health

WalkBoston makes walking safer and easier in Massachusetts to encourage better health, a cleaner environment and vibrant communities.

## mission

**walkBoston**  
45 School Street  
Boston, MA 02108  
T: 617.367.9255  
F: 617.367.9285  
info@walkboston.org  
www.walkboston.org

## thank you!

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**Become  
a corporate  
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BY JOE CUTRUFO

## Big chill at the bus stop

Who’s responsible for clearing snow and ice from MBTA bus stops? Is it the municipality or the Transit Authority? Are property owners responsible for clearing snow from bus stops in addition to their abutting sidewalks?

The short answer is “it depends.” All MBTA bus stops are not alike when it comes to snow. Some are routinely cleared by the MBTA and some by municipalities. Stops with shelters that feature advertisements are the responsibility of private contractors. Shockingly, the majority of bus stops are nobody’s responsibility.

While most cities and towns in greater Boston have ordinances requiring property owners to shovel abutting sidewalks, typically only a path of 3 to 4 feet must be cleared. While most owners clear the part of the sidewalk closest to their building, the curb edge and bus stops rarely get done. WalkBoston has been making efforts to create a volunteer program in Somerville where volunteers can “adopt” a bus stop. Adopt-a-Stop programs, which have been popular in cities like Portland, Maine, and Anchorage, Alaska, recruit volunteers to clear snow at the curb edge so bus riders can safely board buses without having to wait in the street. Recruiting volunteers in Somerville has been difficult due to bureaucratic hurdles. It is hoped that by next winter, local Adopt-a-Stop programs will be easier to implement in communities around greater Boston.