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Less stress, workout's great: Walking is green transportation

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

The greenest solutions are usually the simplest ones. So what's simpler than a mode of transportation that's part of your body?

Walking rarely gets taken seriously as an alternative way to get places, but a growing number of Seattle-area residents use their own two feet to commute to work or for other short trips.

Q: I live within two miles of my job. Why should I walk to work instead of riding my bike or taking the bus?

A: Each of those options is greener than driving alone in a car, of course, so pick the one that works best for you. Advantages of walking include:

- It provides wonderful exercise, in some cases burning even more calories per mile than biking.
- Many people find walking much less stressful than bike commuting, and walking aficionados say it gives them time to think.
- You can often time your arrival better by walking than if you take the bus.
- For short trips, it may take less time to walk than to ride the bus when you include the time waiting for the bus and getting to and from bus stops.
- Walking allows you to experience the essence of neighborhoods much more directly than any other type of transportation.

Even if you live too far from work to walk, those same advantages hold true for walking to stores, schools, libraries and other neighborhood destinations.

Q: OK then, what are some disadvantages or challenges with walking to get places?

A: The greatest barrier for many people is that walking often takes more time than other transportation. Here in the Puget Sound area, rain and hills also top the list of issues.

But walking in the rain isn't bad if you have the right gear, and hills pose less of a problem for walking than biking.

Though it may seem safer than biking, walking can be dicey, especially in the approaching dark, rainy months. King County had 19 pedestrian fatalities in 2008, compared with three bicyclist fatalities. Usually about half of the county's pedestrian deaths occur in Seattle.

Q: What are local governments doing to make walking safer and easier?

A: Seattle has a detailed plan to make the city more walkable (www.seattle.gov/transportation, search "pedestrian master plan"). It includes sidewalk construction, street-crossing improvements, education and enforcement of driving violations.

In a pioneering Kirkland program called PedFlag, orange flags placed at crosswalks help pedestrians attract drivers' attention. Kirkland has about 30 PedFlag sites, and several other area communities have adopted this approach.

King County has undertaken various efforts to support walking, including a new project using federal economic-stimulus money to build a pedestrian pathway linking the White Center business district with the Greenbridge neighborhood.

Q: What can I do myself to make walking safer and more enjoyable?

A: Take advantage of the many Internet resources available, such as www.WalkScore.com, which ranks Seattle neighborhoods' walkability. Google Maps (www.google.com/maps) allows you to choose "walking" instead of "by car" when seeking directions.

Many walkers clip flashing blinkers to their clothing to help drivers see them in the dark and rain. Key-chain whistles also enhance safety, and organizations often give away both those items at festivals and health fairs. Stick to the busiest streets when walking alone after dark.

Comfortable walking shoes are vital, and some serious walkers swear by insoles.

Q: I still don't get the appeal of walking. Any last thoughts?

A: Let's let Angie Malpass, a Central District resident who walks two miles to her downtown job nearly every day, answer that one:

"Walking keeps me healthy, and it helps me stay positive and better handle stress at work," she says. "It's more of an activity or pastime than it is a commute."

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services.

Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com