Common sense suggests that taking public transit to work involves more walking than taking one’s car door to door. Indeed a 2005 study by Besser and Dannenberg noted that walking to and from public transportation can be sufficient to attain recommended levels of daily physical activity. A recent study by Lachapelle and Frank further examined the relationship between transit use and physical activity along with the impact of employer-sponsored public transit passes.

Greater Levels of Sufficient Walking among Public Transit Users
Lachapelle and Frank found that:
• Transit users walked greater distances, took fewer car trips as drivers and slightly more trips as passengers than non-users.
• Individuals who had an employer-sponsored transit pass were more likely to meet physical activity recommendations through sufficient transit related walking.

Car access makes a difference
• Transit users generally have less access to a car, not always by choice.
• People with greater access to a car are less likely to meet physical activity guidelines through transit related walking.

Income makes a difference
• Overall, transit users with higher levels of household income take slightly fewer trips by transit and more by car than those with lower income levels.
• Interestingly, transit users that earn higher income report more walking than both users with lower incomes and non-users.

Neighbourhood makes a difference
• People who live in lower density neighbourhoods were less likely to be moderate walkers or to meet recommendations for physical activity.
What’s happening in Canada?

The 2006 Census found that:

• Public transit use is on the rise.
  The proportion of Canadian commuters using public transit to get to work rose from 10.1% in 1996 to 10.5% in 2001 and 11.0% in 2006.
• The extent to which public transit is used in the different Canadian Census Metropolitan Areas depends on factors such as population density, concentration of jobs in sectors that are well serviced by public transit, the cost of using cars compared to public transit, the availability of parking close to work and the quality of service.

Further Research

The authors suggest that further research could focus on whether these results may be caused by transit users’ preference for an active lifestyle, travel constraints, or choice of residential location, and could also explore the influences of quality of public transit service, incentives to use transit and features of the built environment at destinations on the relationship between transit use and physical activity.

What have we learned?

• The findings suggest that transit users participate in more multimodal trips that involve walking, and often walk greater distances between destinations.
• Employer sponsored transit pass holders may leave their car at home more often, work in locations that are denser and better served by transit, and that enable shopping and leisure trips by walking during the commute.
• Locating workplaces where transit use is a viable alternative to commuting by car may increase transit use and associated walking. In addition, the presence of shops and services near the place of employment is highly related to the likelihood of walking at mid-day.
• Transit incentives are worth consideration by public health policy makers as a physical activity strategy that can be implemented in a shorter time frame than structural changes to the built environment.
• Employers may benefit from sponsoring transit passes through reduced parking demand and employee retention.