

CDC STUDY TAKES A LOOK AT THE BENEFITS OF URBAN LIFE

By RANDY SOUTHERLAND

Atlanta's sprawling layout often makes walking -- and most forms of physical exercise -- impractical.

But health researchers say that hope lies in the way an urban environment is built. This month, researchers from Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health have launched a study to determine whether mixed-use developments such as Atlantic Station encourage people to be more physically active.

"This study took root in that we wanted to identify whether different neighborhood settings might influence people's physical activity and get them away from the television and out the door, and also out of the automobiles," said study director Dr. Karen Mumford, a faculty member at Emory's Rollins School. "We really wanted to study sites like this to figure out whether they provide health benefits in terms of increasing walking and reducing automobile use."

Researchers will select 200 participants who have signed pre-sales or pre-lease agreements at Atlantic Station. They will provide data on how much they walk or drive before their move into the development and then similar data a year later. In addition to surveys, each person will wear travel- and activity-monitoring devices for five days that will track their movements using GPS devices.

Mumford says that the study will allow researchers to pinpoint the role that built environment, neighborhood layout, accessibility of shops and pedestrian infrastructure such as sidewalks and trails play in travel and physical activity patterns.

Researchers picked Atlantic Station because it embodied the characteristics of a true mixed-use development. Residential, retail and restaurants are close together and a MARTA line is nearby. It also offers residents from a variety of demographic groups.

Finding ways to get people to exercise more is becoming a critical concern for public health officials. Two nationwide studies released in 2003 linked sprawl with increased rates of obesity.

"How you build the environment affects whether people can be physically active," said Dr. Andrew Dannenberg, associate director for science in the division of emergency and environmental health services in the National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH), at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. "You know plenty of places [in Atlanta] that make walking very difficult. But in other cities such as New York, you walk very readily. There are sidewalks everywhere. It is made to be a walkable city."

Research shows that more people walking can help reduce air pollution that is linked to respiratory diseases such as asthma.

One study conducted by the CDC during the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta found that traffic went down during the games -- while the city was tied up with games and most people utilized buses. The overall reduction in cars on the streets produced a measurable reduction in levels of ozone. When the Olympics ended and traffic went back to normal, asthma rates increased.

"So there is a direct link between [how clean] our air is and respiratory disease," he said. "So how we build our environment and finding ways to get people walking, biking, on mass transit does help clean up the air."