

Start walking!

Walking is an easy, low-cost way to stay fit. So why don't more of us do it?

by Lynda Hills

Getting the couch potato off the couch is one of the goals of UVic exercise psychologist Dr. Ryan Rhodes' new study on individual beliefs about leisure time walking.

"Everyone knows that physical activity is good for you. Among other things, it offsets depressive symptoms and raises self-esteem," Rhodes says. "But we get a gap between this knowledge and people actually taking part in physical activity."

The most common barriers to physical activity are time, energy and motivation. Rhodes hopes that findings from his study will help UVic partner with government agencies to develop a better health promotion campaign and influence infrastructure decisions.

The study looks at three major personal components: personality and attitudes; social support; and environment.

"It's a large-scale assessment of how these factors interrelate and differ in gender, age groups, and various geographical regions of B.C.," Rhodes says. "Ultimately, it will provide information about whether certain areas are more conducive to physical activity, whether attitudes towards it are chang-

ing, and whether there are differences by demographics as well."

Last month, Rhodes sent out 3,000 surveys to a random group of B.C. citizens asking about their habits and beliefs on walking and physical activity. A second, follow-up survey will soon be sent to the same people to evaluate their actual activity.

"We look at the structure of the environment, like properly maintained trails and sidewalks. We're also going to look at safety," he says. "If we do find that the infrastructure is important, we'll move toward working with city planners."

Rhodes chose to study leisure time walking because previous research looked at physical activity in general and didn't focus on the type of activity. "Walking is the most preferred, easiest accessible, low-cost activity and can be done at a moderate intensity."

On a personal note, Rhodes admits he too grapples with motivation when it comes to physical activity. "It's not the first thing I want to do at the beginning or end of the day," he says. "I'm just like everyone else."

The study is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.