



## FACT SHEET:

# Where You Live Matters! Neighbourhood Environments and Resources for Healthy Living: A Focus on Diabetes in Toronto<sup>1</sup>

Toronto has the highest urban rate of diabetes in Ontario. *Neighbourhood Environments and Resources for Healthy Living – A Focus on Diabetes in Toronto*, mapped diabetes rates across the city and found the lowest income and most under serviced neighbourhoods also had the highest diabetes rates. Many of those neighbourhoods scored poorly on the *Healthy Resource Index* which rated a neighbourhood based on its proximity to parks, grocery stores and family doctors and on the *Activity Friendly Index*, which assessed whether the local environment encouraged walking & bicycling and other physical activities.

### Key Findings:

Neighbourhoods with the highest rates of diabetes tended to be outside the downtown area. The general characteristics of high diabetes, 'high risk', neighbourhoods were:

- Lower average household incomes and higher concentrations of visible minority residents and immigrants
  - Lower levels of walking and cycling
  - Poor access or longer distances to get to healthy resources such as stores selling fresh fruits & vegetables and diabetes education programs
  - Fewer parks and recreation centres
2. People living in "activity-friendly" neighbourhoods reported walking and bicycling more often and were less dependent on cars for travel. "Activity-friendly" neighbourhoods also had lower diabetes rates.
  3. Some 'high risk' areas of the city with lower income levels and higher proportions of visible minority residents had lower than expected rates of diabetes. In these neighbourhoods, higher activity friendliness and better access to healthy resources may protect residents from developing diabetes.

Higher income neighbourhoods had low rates of diabetes, even in parts of Toronto that scored low on activity-friendliness or had poor access to healthy resources. A higher income may give people more options for exercise and healthy eating and make them less dependent on their immediate environment (eg. athletic club memberships and the ability to drive to supermarkets)

### Discussion:

Policies that identify neighbourhoods for attention and investment should take into account the health needs of the local population and the existing availability of resources that promote a healthy lifestyle. In this atlas, we noted a striking mismatch between areas of Toronto where

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<sup>1</sup> **From:** Glazier RH, Booth GL, Gozdyra P, Creatore MI, Tynan AM, eds. *Neighbourhood Environments and Resources for Healthy Living – A Focus on Diabetes in Toronto: ICES Atlas*. Toronto: Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences, 2007.



healthy resources are most needed and where they are located. High-risk neighbourhoods are ideal targets for community-based interventions aimed at diabetes prevention and management. A focus on community development and community action may be needed at the local level to identify and put in practice potential interventions to improve health in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including increasing opportunities for physical activity and healthy eating.

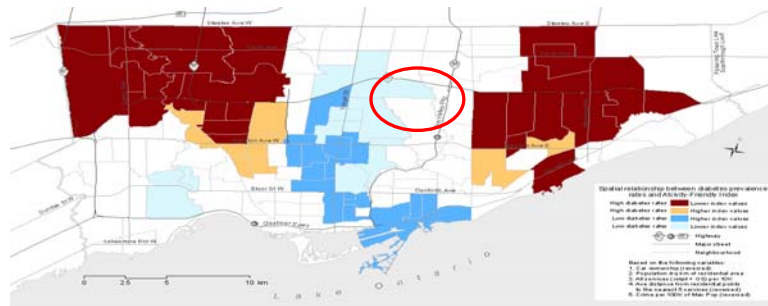
**Recommendations:**

To reduce the burden of diabetes in communities, changes in planning, development and zoning practices should be implemented that encourage daily activity and healthy food choices, such as:

1. Improving access to public transit
2. Increasing the number of places that people can walk to in the suburbs, like parks, libraries, schools, daycares and shops
3. Changing zoning by-laws that prohibit stores from being built in residential areas
4. Providing tax or other incentives to encourage grocery stores and fruit stands to locate in high-need areas
5. Building density in high need areas in order to attract retail services and public transit
6. Designating some streets or parts of streets for pedestrian traffic only
7. Increasing bicycle routes
8. Building recreation centres and reducing barriers to their use in high-need areas

**About the Study:**

In this study, we developed two indices to rate Toronto's 140 neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods scored high marks for being *'Activity Friendly'* if they were densely populated, had lots of retail services that were easy to walk to, included fewer families that owned cars and had lower crime rates. Neighbourhoods scored high marks for having *'Healthy Resources'* if they had good access to: stores selling fruits and vegetables, recreational spaces, parks & schoolyards, and family doctors.



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