

# Charlottesville

## NAMED ONE OF

# TOP TEN

## Healthiest Towns

BY JOANNE DIMAGGIO

**N**early every year, Charlottesville pops up on one of the top ten "best of" lists published by national magazines.

Besides the overall distinction of being the best place to live, Charlottesville has been named among: the best place to retire; the best cities for launching a business; the best places to drink wine; the top places to raise a family; the best small college towns; the best places to relocate—the list goes on and on.

Now AARP Magazine has named Charlottesville #7 of the top ten healthiest places to live and retire. Charlottesville has earned the "healthiest place" award before, including being named #2 Healthiest Place to Live in America by Kiplinger's Personal Finance; #3 Healthiest Small City to Live in America by Men's Journal; and #6 Top Ten Healthiest Cities for Women by American Health.

So exactly what makes Charlottesville so healthy? To determine the city's healthy quotient, AARP researched everything from the physical aspects of our community to the health and habits of the people who live here. They examined life expectancy; physicians per capita; and the percentage of the population that smokes, has health plans, has trouble affording health care, gets regular checkups, gets regular exercise, commutes by biking or by walking, gets enough emotional support, and was satisfied with life. They looked at the area's stress index; existence of

smoke-free legislation; healthy eating scores; amount of alcohol consumed per month; and fast food outlets per capita. They also examined rates of diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, and obesity; overall mortality; and the mortality rates of heart disease and cancer. All of this—compared to stats from other U.S. towns—gave Charlottesville that coveted top ten spot.

Charlottesville was one of several college towns on the list—not surprising since large universities like U.Va. have medical schools and teaching hospitals that employ top doctors using the latest technology. Charlottesville ranks fourth among U.S. metropolitan areas in the number of physicians per capita, and it also makes the top ten for family-practice doctors, oncologists, and cardiologists.

"There are only 125 medical schools throughout the country, so to have a large academic medical center in a town the size of Charlottesville is not a common thing," said David Foreman, spokesman for the University of Virginia Health System. "We're very lucky as citizens to have this resource available to us. There are treatments available here that are not available in similar hospitals across the country. We have 800 physicians on staff and 750 residents and fellows. When you look at the ratio of residents to physicians, the concentration of medical expertise is pretty astounding. That allows people to get treatment closer to home. It's been shown that in most cases, people will respond better to being treated close to home, so if that's here it makes our community a healthier place."

Another factor unique to Charlottesville's size is that it has not one, but two outstanding hospitals. The 176-bed Martha Jefferson Hospital plays a pivotal role in improving the health status of the Charlottesville community. The hospital's mission is simple: to participate as a community resource in raising the health status of area residents. Martha Jefferson is a resource in many distinct ways, including its Community Health Partnership Program, health information centers such as HealthSource Library, the Cancer Care Resource Center, community health education programs, and health screenings.

### Healthy Resources

AARP also selected Charlottesville because it has "a strong tradition of helping its residents stay healthy." There is no shortage of professionals and organizations to assist residents in every part of their healthcare regimen.

"This is a very active community and there's a lot of support both from the business community, public sector, and the University to try to engage people in physical activity and some form of healthy behavior," said Arthur Weltman, Ph.D., Director of GCRC Exercise Physiology Laboratory and the Exercise Physiology Graduate Program at U.Va.

Susan Del Gobbo, a clinical nutritionist at the U.Va. Nutrition Counseling Center at Northridge, says that people who live in the Charlottesville area are very motivated to make changes in their life.

"I offer nutrition counseling to many highly educated, physically active, community-minded, and engaged individuals who care about their health as well as the health of the environment," said Del Gobbo. "Having contemplated dietary changes they desire, many of my clients arrive at my office ready to change. For residents requiring specialized health

and medical care, Charlottesville is rich with options from the University of Virginia Health System and Martha Jefferson Hospital to outstanding private medical and dental practices, counselors, therapists, nutritionists and dietitians, speech pathologists, acupuncturists, chiropractors, massage therapists, and more. Many professionals at these clinics stay abreast of the latest research and apply it to their practices."

Initiatives like Local Motion—a community campaign designed to inspire residents of all ages, backgrounds, and fitness levels to be physically active—make it easy for residents to learn about services to help them maintain a healthy lifestyle. The campaign was brought to life by a partnership of local government, agencies, non-profits, and businesses interested in improving the health and well-being of the community.

"Charlottesville can't be beat for its many natural and other resources to promote physical activity," said Peggy Brown Paviour of the Thomas Jefferson Health District, and Susan Pleiss of the Quality Community Council in a joint statement. "With its parks, trails, walkways, bikeways, playing fields, and nearby mountains, there are lots of options to get outside and move. Our local parks and recreation departments have facilities and programs to engage people of all ages, and many fitness centers, clubs, and non-profits offer programs and classes for folks that are low-cost or free. Local Motion is about connecting people to these opportunities so that everyone can find a way to be more physically active and feel good about it." (See [www.localmotionhome.info](http://www.localmotionhome.info).)

### **Lifestyle Perks**

College towns traditionally attract people—including a sizable younger population—who demand lifestyle perks such as the ones Paviour and Pleiss mentioned.

"Charlottesville is a reasonably well-educated and relatively high socioeconomic community, so people understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle," Weltman said.

Sports are a big part of life here for residents of all ages. Charlottesville was named 2008 Bicycling Friendly Community at the Bronze Level from the League of American Bicyclists; the #1 Best Retirement City for Golfers by Golf Digest; Best Trail Running by Outside Magazine; and the #1 Best Tennis Town by Tennis Magazine.

Hikers at all levels enjoy trails in the Shenandoah National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, Crabtree Falls, and the Ivy Creek Natural Area, to name a few. The area also boasts many other outdoor locations ideal for exploring by foot—including botanical gardens and fascinating caverns. Plus area parks and recreation departments have programs that cater to a wide range of interests.

"Charlottesville offers a variety of exercise and fitness options for the indoor bound, including state-of-the-art fitness facilities providing an almost overwhelming variety of classes from early morning to late in the evening, dance, yoga and Pilates studios, physical therapy centers, sports clubs, indoor pools, and recreation centers," said Del Gobbo. "Whether exercising inside or out, it's simple to find the gear you need in Charlottesville, from running and bicycle shops to stores selling equipment for extreme sports, to golf shops, stores specializing in gear for anglers and fishermen, to shops carrying dance and workout attire. And sometimes purchasing new equipment motivates people to get out and get fit."

Fitness and exercise facilities of all sizes can be found throughout the Charlottesville area. ACAC operates three such facilities, providing members with aquatics, group exercise, and mind/body programs, racquetball and squash courts, personal training, senior fitness and wellness, physical therapy, kids' programs, a water park, and corporate fitness programs. It is one of two commercial health clubs in the United States that has been certified by the Medical Fitness Association.

"ACAC is a model of what other fitness centers try to emulate," said Weltman. "It has medical and physical therapy practices associated with it, as well as state-of-the-art facilities for exercise and programming. Most employees either have a master's degree in exercise physiology, or they are certified, and that's rare in that kind of setting."

Of its 17,000 members, 3,000 are over age 55—a population that ACAC owner Phil Wendel calls the most active demographic in America. "Aging Boomers and seniors recognize they will live longer than their parents and grandparents—their life expectancy has increased by 30 years over the last century," he said. "There's been an acute interest in senior health and fitness in the last 10 years, and we've done a lot to capitalize on the market."

### **Eating Healthy**

Healthy lifestyle habits include eating wholesome foods and Charlottesville enjoys a richness of fresh foods available from local producers and farmers markets.

"Our semi-rural environment offers a long growing season to farmers and gardeners," said Del Gobbo. "We benefit from easy access to nearly year-round locally grown food, farmers markets, the opportunity to join CSAs, (community supported agriculture), and many stores carry high quality food. Eating well helps us stay well. I've enjoyed watching the food and restaurant scene change over the last three decades. In the late '70s and early '80s, only a few restaurants served a variety of fresh food cooked from scratch."

Foreman added that this interest in eating healthy, combined with the school system's efforts to educate children about the importance of eating right and exercising, is another contributing factor for the accolades Charlottesville receives.

"It's becoming more on the top of people's minds that it's important to have easy access to quality, locally grown food," he said. "With the markets that are available and the producers that are very close to us who provide fresh produce and other foods, when people can see the availability of these products, they take advantage of it. The schools are doing a really good job of making sure to improve meals and educate the kids on the importance of eating well, exercising, and

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getting out. If you can get children to eat healthier and exercise, they're going to go home and work with their parents to do the same thing. It works with recycling, smoking, and a healthier lifestyle. It truly translates down the line."

## New Year's Advice

If being healthier is on your New Year's resolution list, Del Gobbo has this advice: "Think broadly about health, then set small, manageable goals. Do you want to start exercising, join a meditation group, attend a stress reduction course, pursue a new sport, lose weight, or improve your relationship with your spouse? Find a skilled professional to help guide you to your goals unless you are able to hold yourself accountable. Set realistic and positive goals. For example, perhaps you want to lose weight. Instead of crafting a goal to avoid sweets, why not strive to increase your fruit consumption to two pieces a day and your vegetable intake to four servings per day--which is equal to 2 cups cooked or 3-4 cups raw, such as salad greens. Or instead of skipping breakfast, take advice from research that shows normal-weight people eat breakfast as well as lunch, dinner, and usually a daily snack."

With so many ways to get active, there's really no excuse to continue to be a couch potato. "There is a large

percentage of Americans that remain inactive or participate in far less physical challenging activities than the CDC recommends," said Wendel. "Nationally, at best only 20% of Americans are active enough to receive sufficient benefits. Imagine how the healthcare crisis could be mitigated if we could greatly increase that percentage of active Americans? As cities go, however, we are one of the best."

Weltman added that there are very large gains to be made in improving one's health and quality of life by becoming active. "Most organizations recommend 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week. You can exercise on your own and include things like walking, or join a facility if you prefer a more social atmosphere to start an exercise program. You can get involved with clubs, like the Charlottesville Track Club or a bike club, so you have a commitment to go out and do it. People that engage in a healthy lifestyle have an improved quality of life, and improved quality of life lends itself to higher ratings of satisfaction."

In the end, that's what it's all about. In summing up what makes Charlottesville one of the healthiest places to live, AARP concluded: "Residents are not just the healthiest eaters on our list, they are also among the happiest, and most likely to say they are satisfied with their lives."

And that—as they say—is priceless. 🏃

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