

“Walking alone goes on and on... with a friend, you don’t notice how long you’ve been going” : older adults’ walking in Metro Vancouver

A brief prepared by the Centre for Hip Health & Mobility, a research institute of Vancouver Coastal Health and the University of British Columbia



“As you get into your 70’s, you start to have fewer friends...It’s important to get out and go to places like the community centre and stuff because you have the possibility of making a new friend all the time.”

Who we spoke with: Between Spring 2012– Summer 2013 our research team conducted in-depth interviews with 74 older adults residing in Metro Vancouver. Participants were all 65+ and community-dwelling. We conducted interviews in English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Hindi, and Punjabi, approximately one half of our sample was born outside of Canada. In total we spoke with 25 men and 49 women, with an average age of 72 years.

What we asked: We asked participants about their health, physical activity patterns, habits and history, neighbourhood perceptions, neighbourhood walkability, and demographics. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes. Most participants also joined us for a 20 minute walking interview around their local neighbourhood.

What we learned: Each of our 74 participants has a unique story. For the purposes of this research brief, we have focused on themes that best represent the collective views of the group.

Social Destinations Having a reason to get out the front door is the key to walking. Even participants heading to a sedentary activity (e.g., a community movie night or knitting group) have to get from door to door, and many use active transportation. A combination of walking and public transit is common, as many of our participants do not drive, or chose not to. Community centres, seniors centres and places of worship were repeatedly cited as key social destinations for participants.

Social Walking Many of our participants, in particular women, have walking buddies and/or formal walking groups, including a few Nordic pole walkers. Most of the formal, daytime walking groups are comprised of older adults. We repeatedly heard that walking with a group helps the time pass by more quickly, and having a friend to walk with encourages one to get out the door, especially on days when it is tempting to stay inside (on account of health, pain, weather, etc.) .

Social Environment Even participants who walk alone noted they enjoy aspects of the social environment, including seeing familiar faces at local shops, waving to neighbours, watching families play in the local parks, etc.

"Sometimes I think, oh, I don't want to go for a walk but, then usually I say, yeah, but once you've gone you're so happy you did."

"The doctor asked me to swim, and they gave me this pedometer. They said that you're supposed to walk ten thousand steps every day."

"Cause that's where I walk. If it's really raining hard, then I'll walk the mall."

Personal Resourcefulness and Motivations Our most active participants have a long personal history of physical activity. Many have attended community centers and exercise classes for decades. For these individuals, the routine, positive health benefits and social engagement experienced through long-term physical activity motivate them to continue.

External Motivation and Education Many participants discussed the role that family doctors have played in motivating them to walk more regularly. Foreign-born older adults emphasized the role the same-language doctors play, and many have participated in multi-lingual health and wellness workshops.

Weather The most commonly cited deterrent to walking outdoors is heavy rain and wind. We heard this from all of our participants, but especially from foreign-born older adults who come from different climates. Notwithstanding, many devised poor weather solutions (e.g., walking in covered play areas around local schools and walking around large, indoor public spaces, like malls).

Isolation Most of our participants are actively engaged in their communities, providing them with reasons to get out the door. Large immigrant communities in Vancouver, especially neighbourhoods like South Vancouver, provide many multi-lingual opportunities for engagement. Participants from smaller ethno-cultural communities (e.g., an older adult from Japan or Romania), cited fewer opportunities to get involved in their communities, and get out the door. The cost of activities at community centers was also cited as a deterrent.

Physical Concerns On average, our participants were active and healthy. For some participants, however, bodily pain, falls and a fear of falling were all cited as possible deterrents to walking. Many noted that the fear of falling was heightened in the winter months, due to frost, ice and accumulated leaves on the sidewalks.

Personal Safety The vast majority of our participants feel that their neighbourhoods are safe and walkable. Most avoid walking at night. Safety solutions include: carrying cellphones and ID in case of emergency and wearing reflective items. Interactions with homeless individuals were viewed as a part of living in the city, and were very rarely cited as a deterrent to walking.

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