The Secrets of Highly Active Older Adults


BACKGROUND

Physical activity is important in supporting the health and well-being of older adults (65+ years of age). Current Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines recommend that older adults accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each week. Despite all the known benefits of physical activity, the 2007-2011 Statistics Canada report shows that only ~11% of Canadian older adults between the ages of 60-79 years old meet the guideline.

There are many factors that contribute to older adults’ physical activity levels. Early evidence suggests that both built and social environments interact to promote or inhibit their participation in physical activity.

There is a tendency in research literature to focus on factors that impede physical activity, particularly for older adults who are experiencing mobility decline and who are finding that places are becoming less accessible to them as a result. However, there is good reason to focus on factors that support physical activity and to gather ‘lessons learned’ from older adults who are able to maintain their mobility as they age.

WHAT WE DID

As part of the ‘Walk the Talk’ research study we interviewed 27 community-dwelling older adults from across Metro Vancouver. We collected information about participants’ health, physical activity, and built and social environments. We asked participants specific questions about their daily routines and how their built and social environments influenced their physical activity choices and behaviour.

In the analysis of the physical activity data, it became clear that there was a group of highly active group of older adults who had accumulated 30+ minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day. With the aim of focusing on the factors that support physical activity for older adults we explored ‘the secrets’ to how and why these highly active older adults were able to be so physically active.

KEY TERMS

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
Any bodily movement produced by the muscles that results in energy expenditure.

MOBILITY
The ability of a person to move about in their community setting.

RESOURCEFUL
Self-help strategies that are used to maintain independence in daily tasks. Resourceful persons believe that they can do things, are better at self control and are more adaptive to changing situations.

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
Social relationships and the cultural context in which people interact.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT
Human-made spaces that includes urban design, land use patterns and transportation networks.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
“Green” and “blue” spaces that have retain natural features including parks and waterways.

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KEY FINDINGS

We uncovered three key findings from our interviews with this group of highly active older adults. Statements made by participants are included on the right-hand column and illustrate some of our findings.

1. Participants were incredibly resourceful. They spoke of how they were in control of their actions, and of their ability to adapt and be creative. Overall they were very positive.

2. The social environment was essential in participants’ ability to sustain high physical activity levels. They told us that social connections were the motivator to get ‘out and about.’

3. Built environments influenced both social and physical activities. Older adults that lived in supportive built environments were more easily able to be highly physically active. Access to well-designed natural environments was also found to increase physical activity as it made getting out more pleasant and enjoyable.

IMPACT

Our findings show that individual characteristics, social environment features and the built environment features all interact to facilitate community dwelling older adults’ physical activity. The diagram, below illustrates this interaction. Our findings demonstrate the importance of designing communities for older adults so that they can be both socially and physically active. However, individual characteristics (i.e. resourcefulness) also play an important role in whether older adults are physically active.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

If are interested in learning more about this study, or other “Walk the Talk” studies, please contact: Thea Franke at thea.franke@hiphealth.ca

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INSIGHTS FROM INTERVIEWS

“I take the car, you know, I don’t walk here at all. I have my dog and then I go to various parks. I drive sometimes, oh, 10 kms. But every day twice.”

(female, 75 yrs, MVPA: 48min/day)

Walking then is a good thing because it’s good for your own personal health; the thing is you also see another aspect of life other than the envelope that you live in. I live in a small apartment here, and it’s just good to get out of here and see the rest of the world.”

(male, 86 yrs, MVPA: 31min/day)

I believe that elder people eat less, exercise more. It’s good for health, for elder people. Eat less, exercise more.”

(male, 66 yrs, MVPA: 52min/day)

This class starts at nine-thirty but with the way the buses run, I can either be late or early. I choose to be early and do little chores beforehand, go to the grocery store. And come to the community centre early, and chat with friends, we’ve known each other for many years, the same classes.”

(female, 72 yrs, MVPA: 48min/day)