

Physical activity -- not just a 'walk in the park'

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People with more green space in their living environment walk and cycle less often and for shorter amounts of time, according to new research published today in the open access journal *BMC Public Health*.

About five thousand Dutch residents were surveyed in the study which involved completing a questionnaire. Questions focused on participants' physical activity and self perceived health. The percentage of green space within a 1 km and 3 km radius around their house was calculated for each resident.

"Little is known about the way in which green space exerts a beneficial effect. Several explanations are possible" explained Jolanda Maas, who led the research. "In this study we investigate whether a green living environment encourages people to undertake physical activity. We found there was no or a negative relationship between the amount of green space in people's environment and whether they played sports, walked or cycled for leisure."

Maas and her team discovered, that while walking and cycling is favoured by the largest part of the population, there was a negative relationship between the amount of green space and levels of walking or cycling for leisure. In other words people living near to green spaces walked less often, probably as their shops and facilities were further away so they relied more heavily on the use of their car. Apparently closeness of destinations is more important for walking and cycling during leisure time in the Netherlands than availability of green space.

"We found that physical activity is not a likely cause behind the apparent relationship between green space and health. If people don't live near green space they may seek alternative places to exercise. In the future, we need to look at where it is people choose to exercise to understand this more clearly. People's perception of their green space may motivate their behaviour more than the availability of green space itself. What is clear is that the amount people exercise is not related to the amount of green space they live near" concluded Maas.

Source: BioMed Central

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