

Shops and smaller blocks key for active residents

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“If you had a shopping centre that was in a ‘big box’ format...like a mall surrounded by car parking, people were more likely to walk [than if they had nothing to walk to],” she says. Credit: Allan Rostron

A community centre, a 'main street' layout, short blocks, footpaths and street trees are the best features for encouraging people to walk around their suburb, according to a study of Perth neighbourhoods.

The research found there are important 'building blocks' in creating a compact and connected neighbourhood that, if developers get right from the beginning, will give residents the option to walk in the future.

One of the most important elements for increasing [physical activity](#) is a destination to walk to, lead author and UWA research fellow Paula Hooper says.

"If you had a shopping centre that was in a 'big box' format...like a mall surrounded by car parking, people were more likely to walk [than if they had nothing to walk to]," she says.

"But if you had it in a main street, pedestrian-friendly, parking off the street format, the odds of people [walking](#) increased far greater again."

There are also other design details and qualities that enhance the walking experience, Dr Hooper says.

Having smaller block lengths, for instance, decreases the distance residents have to walk to get somewhere and creates more route choices for people.

"If you had a main street centre and highly-connected street networks, we were getting odds ratios of people being about 20 times more likely to be walking within their neighbourhood," Dr Hooper says.

Policy proved effective where implemented

The study considered the WA Government's Liveable Neighbourhoods policy, a set of voluntary community design guidelines introduced in 1998 to limit suburban sprawl and car dependence and encourage more walking, cycling and public transport use.

It examined which of the design guidelines were associated with residents walking more.

Previous research suggests about 50 per cent of what was intended by the Liveable Neighbourhoods policy was actually implemented, Dr Hooper says.

But where it was implemented it clearly had a positive effect of residents' [physical activity levels](#) through walking, she says.

She says the larger, master-planned communities studied often resulted in more walkable neighbourhoods than smaller subdivisions with less coordination.

"People in subdivisions we evaluated tended to have quite good connectivity and pedestrian infrastructure but were often lacking in having the centres and the places to walk to," she says.

Dr Hooper says smaller subdivisions often lack a neighbourhood centre and in instances where there are multiple subdivisions all next to one other it can become a major residential area with nowhere for [people](#) to walk to.

More information: Paula Hooper et al. The building blocks of a 'Liveable Neighbourhood': Identifying the key performance indicators for walking of an operational planning policy in Perth, Western Australia, *Health & Place* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.healthplace.2015.10.005](#)

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