

Home neighborhood motivates older people to physical activity

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A recent study conducted at the Gerontology Research Center of the University of Jyväskylä shows that walk-friendly environmental design may provide opportunities for physical activity in old age. However, especially when mobility function starts to decline, it is important that older adults are aware of attractive environmental factors in their neighborhood.

Physical activity helps to maintain health and function. In old age, physical activity takes place mostly in the home neighborhood. Thus it is important to know if there are attractive environmental features in the neighborhood to motivate [older adults](#) to physical activity also when they experience physical limitations, Senior Researcher Erja Portegijs explains.

The results of this study show that physical activity was higher in participants living in a neighborhood with higher walkability. The walkability index reflects opportunities to walk to different destinations, e.g. for shopping and meeting people. The walkability index is an objective measure that can be calculated from open-source geographical information (maps).

The results also show that participants reporting higher numbers of environmental facilitators for outdoor mobility also reported higher levels of physical activity than those perceiving fewer environmental facilitators in their neighborhood. For example, nearby shops, nature and suitable walkways motivated participants to outdoor mobility. The

relationship was especially strong for those with limited physical function.

It seems that perceiving attractive factors in the environment becomes especially important for [physical activity](#) when mobility function starts to decline and people may need to choose more carefully how to use their energy during the day, Portegijs concludes.

In total 839 inhabitants of Jyväskylä and Muurame in Central Finland participated in this study. The study participants were 75–90 years old and were interviewed at home. Participants were grouped according to the score obtained from a mobility test. Physical [activity](#) was assessed by a self-report questionnaire and with an accelerometer that was worn for one week.

All participants were asked about environmental factors that motivated them to go outdoors. By mapping the home address and studying the area up to 1 km from home, the researchers calculated an objective walkability index for their [home](#) neighborhood. The [index](#) is based on land use mix, population density and road network connectivity in the area.

More information: Erja Portegijs et al. Physical Limitations, Walkability, Perceived Environmental Facilitators and Physical Activity of Older Adults in Finland, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph14030333](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14030333)

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