

Over 60s not using public transport despite health benefits

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Credit: Chris Guy, source: Flickr

Two thirds of adults over 60 rarely or never use public transport, even though it's free and brings health benefits, according to a UCL-led study.

The study, published today in *BMJ Open*, found that older people who used [public transport](#) regularly, walked faster and were more physically active.

Researchers from UCL and the University of Manchester analysed data from over 7,000 [adults](#) from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing and found that those who did not use public [transport](#) had a faster decline in walking speed compared to those who used public transport frequently. Among [older adults](#) who chose not to use public transport, most of whom used cars instead, the decline in walking speed was the greatest.

One third of adults over 60 did not use public transport due to a lack of infrastructure and the poor quality of transport provided, whereas another third had no need as most of them had access to a car. Only six per cent of adults cited [health problems](#) as the reason for not using public transport.

"Despite having free travel, and being mobile, older people are not using public transport for a number of reasons. This is mostly because of the lack of infrastructure and availability of transport. Those who use public transport frequently are more physically active and have stronger lower limb muscle strength than non-users of public transport. So making public transport more accessible to [older people](#) could prevent some age-related declines in functional mobility," explained the lead author Dr Patrick Rouxel (UCL Institute of Education).

Most of the adults involved in the study lived in urban areas yet only 23 per cent used public transport more than once a week. 33 per cent of older adults reported not using public transport because of a lack of infrastructure, and the poor quality of public transport (infrequent, unreliable or inconvenient public transport and other barriers), while 28 per cent reported not using public transport because they did not need to.

Nine per cent of older adults used public transport most days and 14 per cent used it two or three times a week.

"Previous studies on the topic have not been able to take into account the possibility that poor [health](#) may be driving the association between not using public transport and lower mobility, mainly because they did not consider the reasons why people do not use public transport. In this study, we show that poor health does not drive the decreased use of public transport, it's down to poor infrastructure or the lack of need.

"The [health benefits](#) arising from frequent public transport use seem to lead to improvements in older adult's [physical activity](#) and lower limb muscle strength," added Dr Rouxel.

The researchers highlighted the importance of the study given the current context of cuts in public transport availability in England. The average levels of walking speed in this sample of older adults for all categories of public transport use were well below the recommended 1.2 m/s walking speed needed for standard pedestrian crossings. Any increase in the walking speed of older adults through factors such as physical activity and increased public transport use may help them cross the road safely.

Co-author, Professor Tarani Chandola from the University of Manchester added, "Using public transport more than once a week is not only environmentally friendly, but it has all these other benefits such as maintaining people's health and physical activity and reducing their social isolation.

"We already knew that use of public transport declines with age and that there was a link between public transport and mobility, but this study goes further and suggests that there is a faster decline in mobility among those who drive compared to those who take a bus or a train. Improving the quality and access to public transport may help prevent future health

problems among older adults and to maintain their physical capabilities."

Provided by University College London

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