

# Older adults' willingness to travel on foot or by bike may help prevent early functional disability and mortality

January 17 2023

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

For some older adults, getting around in the community becomes difficult with age owing to decline in their physical or cognitive health, which impacts their quality of life and also becomes a social burden. Researchers from the University of Tsukuba have shown that older

adults' willingness to travel farther distances by walking or cycling may help prevent early functional disability and mortality.

In a study recently published in *Health and Place*, researchers developed a model that links rates of death and functional disability in an older adult population to the distances that they considered acceptable to travel on foot or by bicycle, for typical outings in their community. They found that [older adults](#) who were comfortable traveling only [short distances](#)—500 m or less for walking or 1 km or less for cycling—had higher risks of [functional disability](#) and mortality.

"Forms of active travel, like walking and cycling, contribute to maintaining adequate levels of physical activity as we age, and because these forms of travel also facilitate other activities like social visits or grocery shopping, we reasoned that the distances older adults considered acceptable for traveling by these means could be a useful proxy," explains lead author of the study Professor Okura Tomohiro.

To determine whether this proxy information could be linked to future disability or death, the research team surveyed a large sample of adults (residents of Kasama City, Ibaraki, Japan) aged 65 years or older in 2013 to obtain [baseline data](#). The team also collected follow-up data over a period of almost 8 years. They then used these data to create several models, to explore the potential effects of physical characteristics like age and sex, baseline [travel](#) preferences, and geographic characteristics like terrain and population.

"For a meaningful model," Professor Okura Tomohiro says, "it was necessary that we capture data, not only for a wide variety of characteristics—to account for differences inherent in an older adult population—but also over a sufficiently long time period—to allow natural life changes to evolve."

The study's findings could help researchers and policymakers better understand the impact of some of the challenges experienced by individuals as they age. This knowledge can be used to develop ways to better assist vulnerable older individuals or to design services to improve access to the community for older adults.

**More information:** Kenji Tsunoda et al, Acceptable walking and cycling distances and functional disability and mortality in older Japanese adults: An 8-year follow-up study, *Health & Place* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.healthplace.2022.102952](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2022.102952)

Provided by University of Tsukuba

Citation: Older adults' willingness to travel on foot or by bike may help prevent early functional disability and mortality (2023, January 17) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-01-older-adults-willingness-foot-bike.html>

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