

Free bus passes have health benefit, say researchers

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Free bus passes for over-60s may be encouraging older people to be more physically active, say the authors of a study published today in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Researchers from Imperial College London reached their conclusion by analysing four years of data from the UK National Travel Survey. They found that people with a bus pass are more likely to walk frequently and take more journeys by "active travel" - defined as walking, cycling or using public transport. These associations cut across socio-economic groups, suggesting that wealthier and poorer people are benefitting from the scheme equally.

Keeping physically active helps to maintain mental wellbeing, mobility and [muscle strength](#) in [older people](#) and reduces their [risk of cardiovascular disease](#), falls and fractures. Previous research has shown that 15 minutes of moderate daily exercise is associated with a 12 per cent lower risk of death in people over 60.

Another study found that 19 per cent of adults in Britain get their recommended amount of physical activity through active travel alone. [Public health](#) organisations increasingly believe that "incidental" exercise, such as walking to and from [bus stops](#), may have a key role to play in helping people keep fit.

Free bus passes for people aged 60 and over were introduced in England in 2006, entitling holders to free local bus travel after 9:30am on

weekdays and all day on weekends and public holidays. Pressure on public spending has led to proposals for the scheme, which costs £1.1 billion a year, to be scrapped, or for bus passes to be means-tested.

The scheme's proponents claim that it reduces [social exclusion](#) among older people and ensures access to travel for those on limited incomes. The authors of the new study believe that possible benefits for public health should also be taken into consideration.

"Given the need to encourage older people to be [physically active](#), it's good news that the provision of free bus passes seems to be having a positive impact," said Sophie Coronini-Cronberg, from the School of Public Health at Imperial College London, who led the study.

"Before the government looks at reforming the scheme, they should make sure we understand its value to society. We would welcome more research in this area, such as a detailed cost analysis to establish whether the scheme represents good value for money."

The researchers examined data from the National Travel Survey from 2005, the year before free bus passes were implemented, until 2008. They included results from respondents aged 60 or over in England, giving a total of 16,911 people. The percentage of respondents with a free pass rose from 56.8 per cent in 2005 to 74.7 per cent in 2008.

The findings show that the biggest factor associated with not using active travel or walking is having access to a car. People in large urban areas are more likely to use active transport, and people in rural areas or small towns are more likely to report walking frequently.

More information: S Coronini-Cronberg et al (2012) The impact of free older persons' bus pass on active travel and regular walking in England. *Am J Public Health*. Published online ahead of print September

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