Medical Xpress

Research associates independent travel with better mental health

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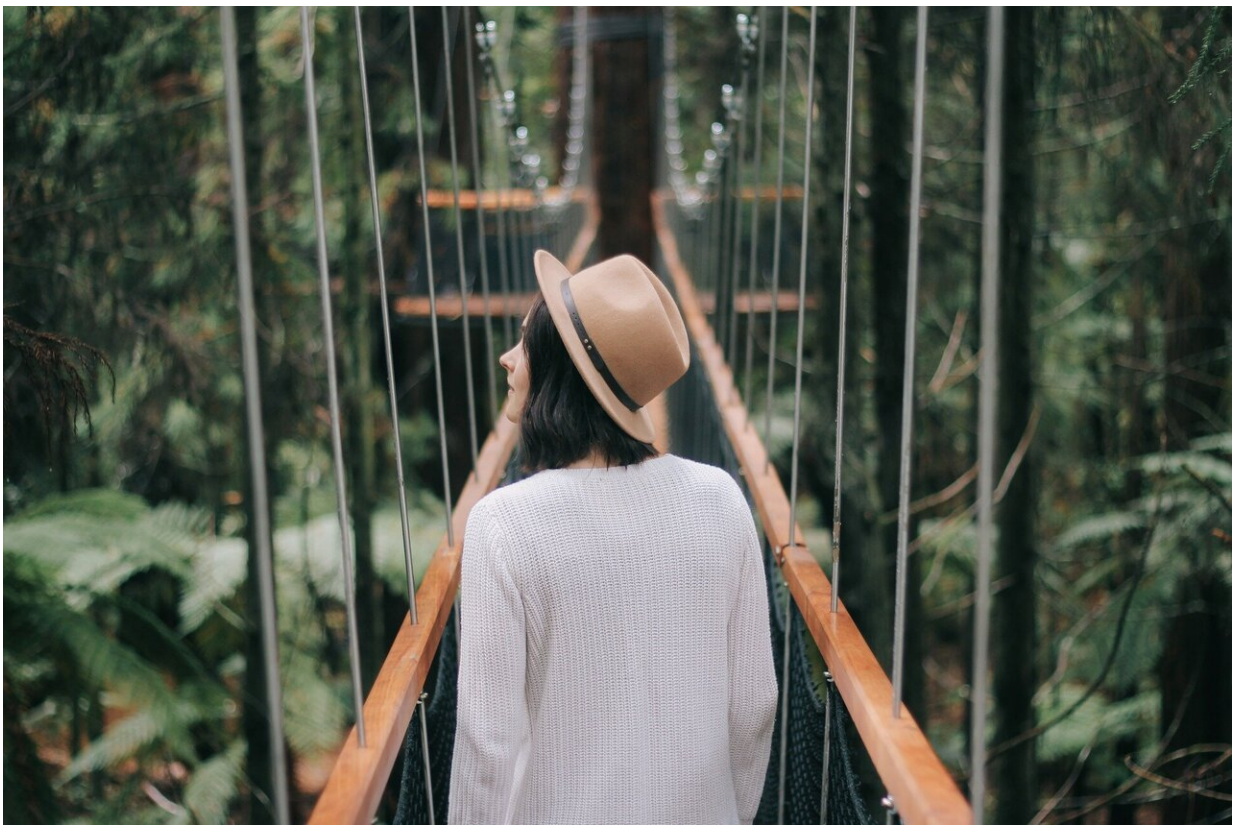

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New research from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) at Trinity College Dublin highlights the importance of older adults being able to travel independently—whether by driving themselves or taking

public transport.

The research, recently published in the journal *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour*, shows that older adults driving, being driven by a partner/spouse and taking public transport are associated with better mental health, higher levels of social participation and greater social networks compared to those being driven by family, friends or taking taxis. The greatest benefits are observed for those driving themselves.

The authors highlight the importance of accessibility to quality transport options and suggest that as the population ages, there is an increasing need for improved transport networks and services that meet the specific needs of older adults, especially in rural areas.

Key findings

- Cars were the most frequently used mode of transport (87.8 percent of adults aged 50 and over)
- Most participants drove themselves (72.2 percent), with 11.7 percent and 5.9 percent relying on lifts from family/friends/taxis and spouse/partner respectively
- 8.5 percent of those aged 50 and over used public transport most frequently. However, this varied by location (23.3 percent in Dublin versus 1.9 percent in rural areas)
- Driving decreases with increasing age but this is more evident in women (men: 86 percent in 50-64 year olds to 70 percent in 75+ years; women: 72 percent in 50-64 year olds to 30 percent in 75+ years)
- Driving, being driven by a spouse/partner or taking public transport was associated with lower depressive symptoms, better quality of life, greater social networks and higher levels of social participation compared to relying on lifts from family/friends or

taxis
- Adults with reduced levels of driving (and particularly non-drivers or those who have stopped driving) report higher depressive symptoms and loneliness, lower quality of life, fewer social networks and lower social participation compared to current drivers
- Men who have stopped driving and men who regularly travel by public transport reported higher levels of loneliness than women

TILDA Project Manager and lead author on the paper, Dr. Orna Donoghue, said:

"Driving allows a level of freedom and independence that is often not available with public transport and therefore it is hugely important for social engagement, mental health and wellbeing. Many people drive less frequently or stop driving as they get older, and this can be a huge upheaval especially if this change is not made by choice. Early planning and the availability of suitable alternative means of transport are vital to facilitate this transition from driving to not driving.

"Family and friends play a hugely important role in providing transport for older adults, allowing them to complete essential daily activities and to maintain their social networks, However, some older adults are reluctant to ask others for lifts so they prioritise what they see as the 'essential' trips rather than the discretionary or social trips, which are also very important for mental health and wellbeing."

Principal Investigator of TILDA, Professor Rose Anne Kenny, added:

"Ideally, older adults would be supported to drive for as long as it is safe for them to do so and as long as they would like to do so. However, we also need to address the challenge of improved transport networks and availability of local amenities and services that meet the specific needs

of older adults and allow them to maintain their independence and social activities. Retaining public transport links and/or identifying alternative means of providing transport is required, and this is especially pertinent given the current challenges to the provision of public transport."

More information: Orna A. Donoghue et al. Who's in the driver's seat? Impact on social participation and psychosocial wellbeing in adults aged 50 and over, *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour* (2019). DOI: 10.1016/j.trf.2019.06.010

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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