

Nearby destinations prove best way to get seniors to go walking

DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP
the Associated Press

SEATTLE - The benefits of walking and being active are well known, especially for older people, but what kind of neighborhood gets seniors going?

It's not necessarily one with lots of walking trails or parks. What matters, researchers found, are the destinations like restaurants, grocery stores and even bars that are within a half-mile of your home.

"The strongest relationship was with daily places we go for eating and socializing," said Anne Vernez Moudon, professor of urban design and planning at the University of Washington. She and other researchers did a three-year study of people 65 and older to find out who regularly walked and why and what types of communities they occupied.

Parks and walking trails - Seattle trademarks - had little to do with how much senior citizens walked, Moudon said. And surprisingly, Seattle's hilly geography also was not a significant factor.

Walkability seemed to depend on the distance to stores, length of blocks and perceived safety. Moudon said people who use public transportation are also more likely to walk, so proximity to bus stops was important in this Seattle study.

Anne Ludlum, who took part in the study, said walking keeps her alert, curious and stimulated: "I want to go and see what the sign in front of Bailey Coy (Books) is today."

She has lived with her husband in a town house in Seattle's dense, pedestrian-friendly Capitol Hill area for more than 10 years. The 75-year-old writer and actress has lived in urban centers most of her life. Some of her friends live in more suburban areas and find it hard to exercise except at a gym.

"That seems ridiculous to me," Ludlum said.

Car-centric Los Angeles where she lived for a few years was not a good fit: "I really felt just completely lost and discombobulated."

The study tracked 936 members of the Seattle-based health plan Group Health Cooperative, who ranged in age from 65 to 97. Data about their walking habits was combined with geographic information from urban planning researchers.

"If you're able to walk to a destination you would normally drive to, then you're going to get physical activity in your everyday life," said Dr. Ethan Berke, lead researcher previously with the University of Washington and now at Dartmouth University.

The study was published in the March issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

The study did not show if a more walkable neighborhood leads to better health or if healthier people tend to live in places where they can walk.

But Berke and his colleagues suspect that exercise is one prescription against Alzheimer's disease, dementia, obesity, heart diseases, depression, cancer and other ailments. Walking's connection to mental health is the subject of Berke's current research.

Ludlum agrees with the theory: "I've always found that living someplace where I could walk to everywhere I needed to go made me much happier and undoubtedly healthier."