

# What makes this route better? A 7-site pilot study of walking among older adults

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** While physical activity benefits people of all ages, only 21% of adults age 65 and older engage in regular leisure-time physical activity – a rate that has changed little in the past 10 years. Neighborhood design may contribute to keeping older adults active and healthy members of the community.

**Objective:** Interviews were conducted to explore factors that influence the route(s) older adults choose when walking in their neighborhoods and to solicit feedback about items in a neighborhood audit tool.

**Methods:** Investigators at seven universities across the US each identified a central local site for study (e.g., senior center or senior residence) and recruited older adults who walked within the neighboring area. These individuals were asked where they walked for exercise and for errands, what route(s) they took, and what made those routes better than others. In addition, the investigators asked the participants to review a neighborhood audit tool and provide feedback on the importance of neighborhood features related to walking.

**Results:** When walking for errands, the individuals interviewed selected routes that were the shortest/most direct, that had well-maintained sidewalks, and that were safer, especially if more people were around. When walking for exercise, the individuals mentioned distance less frequently, but safety was a major concern. More people also mentioned traffic concerns and the desire to have pleasant surroundings when walking for exercise. When asked to identify neighborhood features that might make older adults more likely to walk for any reason in the neighborhood (items included in a pilot audit tool), most interviewees indicated having more places to shop and other places to go were important, as were more sidewalks and safe places to walk, safer street crossings, less traffic, more benches or places to rest, and improved safety features. In this sample, the condition of sidewalks, crossings, and curb cuts were of particular importance, as many respondents expressed concerns about the risk of tripping or falling.

**Conclusion:** Neighborhood environments that encourage older adults to walk provide safety and good-quality sidewalks, as well as interesting destinations and places to rest along the way.



Seattle, WA



Alamosa, Co

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## Methods

- **Study sites were centered at senior centers (Chicago, IL; McKeesport, PA; Hendersonville, NC) and/or senior housing (Chicago, IL; Berkeley, CA; Columbia, SC; Seattle, WA ; Alamosa, CO)**
- Convenience sample of older adults ( $n=52$ ) who walked in the neighboring area (within ½ mile radius of center or housing).
- Interviewers administered survey of demographics, health status, and walking behavior.
- Interviewers asked:
  - Do you walk for exercise/enjoyment? If so, where do you walk? Using what route? Why that route?
  - Do you walk for errands? If so, where do you walk? Using what route? Why that route?
  - Do other older adults walk in this neighborhood?
  - In your opinion, what changes would make older adults more likely to walk in the neighborhood?
- Analysis: Calculated descriptive statistics on demographics, health status, and behaviors. Conducted note based analysis of qualitative data.



Hendersonville, NC

## Results

- Of the 52 older adults interviewed, roughly 3/4 were female (77%), white (73%), and able to get around without the use of an assistive device (73%) (see Table 1).
- Most (63%) walked both for errands and for exercise/recreation, while 19% walked only for exercise/recreation and 13% for errands only (see Table 2).
- Most (63%) indicated that other older adults walked in their neighborhood.

**Table 1. Demographics of sample (n=52 across 7 sites)**

	n	%
<b>Age</b>		
<65	4	8%
65-74	22	42%
75-84	16	31%
85+	9	17%
Missing	1	2%
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	40	77%
Male	11	21%
Missing	1	2%
<b>Race</b>		
White	38	73%
Black/African American	7	13%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	6%
Hispanic	3	6%
Missing	1	2%

**Table 2. Walking habits of older adults in sample (n=52)**

	n	%
<b>Walks outdoors for...</b>		
Exercise/recreation and errands	33	63%
Exercise/recreation only	10	19%
Errands only	7	13%
Neither errands nor exercise/recreation	2	4%
<b>Do other older adults walk in this neighborhood?</b>		
Yes	33	63%
No	18	35%
Don't know	1	2%



"I want to get there"  
Alamosa, CO



"Hard to get past bushes"  
McKeesport, PA

## Results (continued)

### Where do you walk for exercise/recreation? Using what route? Why that route?

Individuals who walked around their neighborhoods were less concerned about distance (depending on their abilities) and selected routes that were:

- Safe from traffic dangers
- Safe from strangers
- Aesthetically pleasing and varied

Many respondents preferred to walk in attractive, varied surroundings



### Where do you walk for errands? Using what route? Why that route?

Individuals walking for errands selected routes that were:

- Shortest/most direct
- Along well-maintained sidewalks
- Safe from traffic
- Safe from strangers



How I get to the bank  
Alamosa, CO

### What changes would make older adults more likely to walk in the neighborhood?

- More sidewalks and safe places to walk
- Safer street crossings
- Less traffic
- Having more places to shop and other places to go
- More benches or places to rest
- Improved safety features
- Well maintained sidewalks, crossings, and curb cuts

Older adults want safe surfaces to walk on – unlike these...



## Conclusions

Neighborhood environments that encourage older adults to walk provide:

- Safe surfaces (smooth sidewalks, well maintained curb cuts)
- Traffic safety (places to walk away from cars, pedestrian-friendly crossings, pedestrian signals with time to cross)
- Safety from crime (other people walking, lack of "scary" strangers and situations)
- Interesting destinations (especially when walking for errands)
- Pleasant and varied routes (especially when walking for recreation)
- Places to rest or get out of the weather along the way