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# Why Older Adults Don't Walk

## Safer designs could encourage more pedestrian trips

To the extent that walking can be safely substituted for driving, it should be encouraged among all pedestrians, but seniors present an especially rich opportunity for change, since so much of their travel—90% of their trips—is by car. For many older people, walking would also produce significant health benefits. But walking is disproportionately dangerous for older adults. In 2000, pedestrians 65 and older accounted for 21% of the nation's pedestrian fatalities while making up only 13% of the U.S. population, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data.

Some key questions are: how can walking be made safer for older pedestrians, and under what conditions does it make the most sense to encourage it?

Walking can enhance the health of older people beyond the traditional cardiovascular and muscular-skeletal benefits associated with exercising more. Some of the positive results include lowered risk of chronic disease, improved immune response and recovery, and decreased depression and anxiety. In addition, any policy that results in more walking and less driving creates benefits for the entire community by reducing congestion and its associated pollution and increasing foot traffic, which makes neighborhoods generally safer and more attractive.

Many aspects of the physical environment discourage seniors from walking. Among them, destinations are too far away; older pedestrians are more likely to be targets of criminals than younger adults; and crosswalks, sidewalks, and other pedestrian amenities are absent or are hard to use because they are in disrepair or inappropriately designed or scaled for older people.

***Studies have shown older pedestrians incapable of crossing a street within the time normally allotted by a crosswalk signal. In one study of adults aged 72 and older, fewer than 1% could cross in the time given.***

In addition, older people's physical limitations can make walking difficult. As evidence of the debilitation that can afflict the older of the old, nearly half of women older than 78 can't easily walk a few blocks, according to a Norwegian study. The implication is

that, in many instances, older people can drive longer into old age than they can walk.



Once outside their cars, older people can be more vulnerable to injury or death if a crash occurs while they are on foot. One significant contributor to this heightened frailty is the decreased bone density that accompanies advanced aging in many people. The Federal Highway Administration reports that pedestrians 65 and older are two to eight times more likely than younger people to die after being hit by a motor vehicle.

Some research suggests that their physical limitations make seniors more likely to be involved in accidents than younger adults, because failing vision and other physical impairments can limit older pedestrians' awareness of their environment and slow their reaction times. Often, older people simply can't walk fast enough. Studies have shown older pedestrians incapable of crossing a street within the time normally allotted by a crosswalk signal.

In a study by Jean Langlois of adults aged 72 and older, fewer than 1% could cross in the time given.

Elements that can create safer environments for senior pedestrians include safe sidewalks, crosswalks, clear pedestrian signals, sufficient crossing time at intersections, benches for resting, reduced traffic speed, and traffic islands. Placing stores, services, and transit routes within walking distance of residential areas is another strategy that would make walking a more attractive option for older adults.

Implementing designs and policies that encourage seniors to walk may also encourage walking among other age groups, which would make streets safer for all pedestrians, including seniors. It might also encourage younger adults and children to establish the regular walking habits that will help them continue walking into older age.