

The UMass Worcester Prevention Research Center, located at UMass Medical School in Worcester, MA, is a member of the CDC's Prevention Research Center (PRC) network. Our work promotes healthy lifestyles through increased opportunities for physical activity, healthy eating and healthy weight. For more information, visit: [www.umassmed.edu/prc](http://www.umassmed.edu/prc)

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### Overview

Older adults can benefit from regular physical activity, such as walking. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that adults aged 65 and older walk briskly for 150 minutes per week. Regular physical activity can help older adults maintain a healthy lifestyle and live independently. Older adults walk for recreation, including exercise. They also walk for utilitarian reasons (for a purpose), such as to go to a store, library, or post office. Understanding why older adults walk, or why they do not walk, can help public health initiatives promote regular walking.

### Main Questions

- What proportion of older adults walk for exercise in their neighborhoods?
- What proportion of older adults walk for utilitarian reasons, such as going to the store, post office, bank or other businesses?
- How do walking habits of older adults differ by neighborhood characteristics?

### Study

This study analyzed walking habits of 745 adults, aged 70 years and older, living in 16 neighborhoods in the Boston, MA area. The study looked at participant's overall health, such as history of falls, use of medications, balance, and walking speed. Each participant reported on their walking habits, such as how often they walk outdoors, why they walk, and where they go. The study then looked at the neighborhoods where the adults lived and what their neighborhoods were like. For example, they looked at where stores, libraries, hospitals and other places were located, the distances to these places, and community demographics.

### The Bottom Line

The walking habits of older adults vary by neighborhood and walking conditions. Older adults were more likely to walk to the store, post office, or hospital if these places were in their neighborhood. In contrast, exercise walking did not seem to depend on any measureable neighborhood characteristics.

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### Source

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Photo by [www.pedbikeimages.org/Laura Sandt](http://www.pedbikeimages.org/Laura_Sandt)

### Spotlight on Results

- 1 in 3 adults (33%) walk outside at least five days per week in neighborhoods.
- Forty-two percent (42%) walk recreationally at least once a week, with little variation among neighborhoods.
- Twenty-eight percent (28%) walk for transportation or errands at least once a week, with the highest rates in North Brookline, Jamaica Plain, and Downtown Boston neighborhoods.
- About 18.3% walked for both exercise/recreation and for a purpose at least once a week.
- Poor health or physical ability may make walking difficult or dangerous, and limit the amount of regular walking.

### Call for Action

While recreational walking may depend more on personal motivation, walking for errands can be promoted by community planning, pleasant shopping areas, and safe streets.