

WellSpring

Stepping Out: Mall Walking and Older Adults

Mall Walking Programs in Alberta

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Many older adults face barriers to walking in their neighbourhoods. These barriers can include bad weather, fear of criminal activity, unsafe sidewalks, vulnerability to traffic at crossings, and a lack of public washrooms and rest stops.

Although people drive to malls instead of walking to the corner store, malls are often centrally located, well served by transit and offer seniors and others a free year-round place to walk.

Dr. Tish Doyle-Baker highlights the benefits of mall walking in the following article. Community mall walking programs can both address some of the physical activity issues listed above (e.g., safety) and provide social support.

Successful Mall Walking Programs

Many shopping malls encourage mall walking. For example, West Edmonton Mall boasts 6 km of indoor walking space and encourages walkers to follow a walking "course." Edmonton's Bonnie Doon Mall hosts a senior's group who meet regularly for a walk followed by coffee and often guest speakers on health issues.

Londonderry Mall has Edmonton's largest mall walking program, with 800 members. Members also socialize together and receive discounts at participating stores. The club even has a

"Mall Walkers Den" and a program with fitness warm-ups, fun activities and monthly theme days (www.londonderrymall.com/cgi-bin/events/more?i=513).

In Calgary, the Skyline Seniors' 55 Plus Outdoors Club and the Family Leisure Centre Seniors' Outdoor Club offer mall walking and other outdoor activities. South Centre Mall encourages mall walkers with a distance map and special events or guest speakers.

Although many mall walking programs may meet the needs of older adult members, these groups would also benefit from the involvement of physical activity and health professionals. As the following article points out, malls are an important facility to consider when developing community programs for the aging population.

"...Malls are often centrally located, well served by transit and offer seniors and others a free year-round place to walk."



Photo: www.pedalkemages.org/Dan Burden



Mall Walking: A New Strategy for Physical Activity Among Older Adults

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There's good news when it comes to physical activity, aging and mall walking.

First, it's never too late to become physically active, and a mall walking program is a safe place to start (US HHS, 1996). Second, even a small amount of activity can improve health regardless of age and gender. Third, research identifies mall walking as one strategy that can help older people become more active.

This article describes both the benefits of walking in general and the benefits of mall walking, especially for older adults (focusing on a recent University of Calgary pilot project).

Benefits of Walking

Several research studies show positive physical and psychological health benefits from walking. Two recent studies identified the effects of walking on life expectancy, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

- In the first study, walking 30 minutes a day lengthened life by 1.3 years and added 1.1 more years without cardiovascular disease (compared with people with low activity levels).

People who exercised more intensely gained 3.7 years of life and added 3.3 more years without cardiovascular disease (Duncan et al., 2005).

- In the second study, walking two miles a day cut the risk of death almost in half. This research cites the Honolulu Heart Study, a study of 8,000 men, aged 60 and older who appeared in "good enough health" to be able to walk.

The study found that the walkers' risk of death from cancer was especially lower and that walkers were less likely to die in the 12 years after the study (Kesaniemi et al., 2001).



Photo: www.pedalkimages.org/Dan Burden

Other walking studies also show the benefits of a brisk walking program for 30 minutes per day, five days per week.

- A 12-week walking intervention produced significant increases in functional capacity and decreased blood pressure (Tully, Cupples, Chan, McGlade, & Young, 2005).
- A six-week walking intervention altered body fat distribution, reduced anxiety and tension, increased aerobic fitness, and increased confidence in walking (Murphy, Nevill, Neville, Biddle, & Hardman, 2002).

Benefits of Mall Walking for Older Adults

A lack of sidewalks and adequate lighting can make walking difficult in some neighbourhoods (Saelens, Sallis, & Frank, 2003). Older adults may feel especially vulnerable to traffic, curb heights and weather conditions. As well, a single person walking alone may feel unsafe. Many older adults may also have trouble getting to exercise facilities and programs (these programs may not train and monitor older adults very well).

Community mall walking programs can overcome several of these physical barriers and safety concerns. In addition, walking programs offer older adults social support. A recent study identified shopping malls as the second most popular walking site for people 45 years or older, with more women than men likely to walk in malls (Eyler, Brownson, Bacak, & Housemann, 2003).

Results of a Pilot-Study on Mall Walking

A recent University of Calgary pilot study (supported by the Calgary Health Region) looked at the benefits of an eight-week walking program.

The following gives you more information about the study and its participants:

- Recruitment method: Advertising in the host mall and through the Calgary Health Region's "Living Well" program and community newsletters.
- Medical conditions: Conditions included lung and heart problems, arthritis and cancer.
- Screening: PAR-Q and physician approval with a Par-Med-X.
- Number of participants: 52 (39 after testing).
- Average age: 66.4 (with an age range between 46 and 83).
- Overall participation rate: 62.4%.

The program ran for two eight-week periods in the fall of 2005 and winter of 2006. Participants chose their own pace, time and frequency. We also encouraged participants to walk further and to increase their speed over the measured course in the mall.

This project supports the effectiveness of a mall walking program. Results show that physical activity behaviour and most fitness indices significantly improved, e.g., walking distance, post rating of perceived exertion (RPE) and BMI.

"It's never too late to become physically active, and a mall walking program is a safe place to start."

Participants showed high self-motivation: 62.4% attended the program and most (64.1%) participated more than three days per week. In addition, the average age of participants was 66, suggesting that older adults are motivated to participate in a community program.

These results suggest that malls are an important facility to consider in developing future community programs for the aging population (Culos-Reed, Stephenson, Doyle-Baker, & Dickinson, 2006).

Mall Walking as a Key Strategy to Promote Physical Activity

Mall walking is generally safe for older adults, can lead to improved health (regardless of age or gender), and is an activity strategy proven to work with older adults. Mall walking is one way to help older adults improve their functional mobility and independence.

Many initiatives to increase physical activity focus on individuals and clinical settings rather than on community interventions. Mall walking is one community-based intervention that can promote physical activity among the older population (Elavsky et al., 2005).

For more information about this pilot project, see the following article:

Culos-Reed, S.N., Stephenson, L., Doyle-Baker, P.K., & Dickinson, J.A. (2006). Mall walking as a physical activity option: Results of a pilot project. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*. Decision on manuscript ID JAPA-2006-1237.

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Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of Albertans through physical activity.

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IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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