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Walking for recreation and perceptions of the neighborhood environment in older Chinese urban dwellers

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Introduction: Engagement in walking for recreation can contribute to healthy aging. Although there is growing evidence that the neighbourhood environment can influence walking for recreation, the amount of such evidence in relation to older adults is scarce and limited to Western low-density urban locations. Asian urban environments are typified by distinctive environmental and cultural characteristics that may yield different patterns to those observed in Western countries. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to examine associations of perceived environmental attributes with overall and within-neighbourhood walking for recreation in Chinese elders (65+ years) residing in Hong Kong, an ultra-dense Asian metropolis.

Methods: A sample of 484 elders was recruited from 32 neighbourhoods stratified by socio-economic status and walkability (dwelling and intersection densities). Validated questionnaires measuring perceived neighbourhood environment and weekly minutes of overall and within-neighbourhood walking for recreation were interviewer-administered.

Results: Results showed that the level of recreational walking was twice to four times higher than that reported in Western adults and elders. While overall walking for recreation showed a general lack of associations with perceived environmental attributes, within-neighbourhood recreational walking was positively related with proximity of recreational facilities, infrastructure for walking, indoor places for walking, and presence of bridge/overpasses connecting to services. Age and educational attainment moderated the associations with several perceived environmental attributes with older and less educated participants showing stronger associations.

Discussion: Traditional cultural views on the benefits of physical activity and the high accessibility of facilities and pedestrian infrastructure of Hong Kong may explain the high levels of walking. Although specific neighbourhood attributes, or their perception, may influence recreational walking within the neighbourhood, the compactness and public-transport affordability of ultra-dense metropolises such as Hong Kong may make it easy for elders to compensate for the lack of favourable neighbourhood attributes by walking outside the neighbourhood.

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