



To: City Transport, Place Directorate

From: Adrian Davis

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Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No.115 Older people's experience of cycling

Top line: Cycling can be an enjoyable way to meet physical activity recommendations and is suitable for older people. Key findings include that cycling promotion for this age group must focus on improving confidence and consider the need for reinforcement & repetition.

Cycling is a form of physical activity with particular benefits for older people. It is non-weight bearing and therefore has less impact on the joints than jogging or other running sports, and several studies of disease causation have shown significant risk reduction for all-cause and cancer mortality, cardiovascular disease, colon and breast cancer, and obesity morbidity in middle-aged and elderly cyclists. Cycling may also contribute to improved quality of life for older people, by enhancing social networks and building empowerment, and can be incorporated easily into a daily routine. Despite these benefits, cycling participation by older adults in many developed countries is low. In contrast to many continental European cities where older people continue to cycle, in Australia just 18% of those who aged over 50 cycled in the past year, compared with 50% of those aged 10–29 and 39% of those aged 30–49 years.

In a qualitative study of the experience of older people and cycling in Australia, the study investigated the motivators, barriers and facilitators of cycling in older people who participated in a pilot cycling programme.¹ The study was part of a cycling promotion study among older people, looking at improvements in leg strength and balance as risk factors for falls. Adults who aged 50–75 years, who were willing to cycle for two or more hours per week over a 12-week period, were recruited through local advertising and word of mouth in a discrete geographic area of Sydney. The strategies used to promote cycling in this study were simple and inexpensive, mainly linking motivated people to existing resources, but had a high success rate for increasing cycling participation. This work explored motivators, barriers, and outcomes to taking up or increasing cycling and highlighted successful strategies for promoting cycling in older people.

The authors also concluded that an age-targeted cycling skills course is a very successful strategy. Encouragement for Bicycle User Groups to reach out to older people, widespread availability of cycling maps, and advertising the multiple benefits of cycling are also helpful. Continued improvement to cycle paths was strongly supported by participants. Fear of cars and other motorised traffic is a strong barrier to cycling across all age groups so investment in infrastructure should also have benefits across the population. Another interesting finding is that the sense of empowerment and pride was felt very strongly by female participants but not even mentioned by men. It is possible that men may be inherently more physically confident and assume that they will be able to ride without problems while for women this is a realisation rather than an assumption. It could also be that both sexes felt empowered and proud of cycling but that women were more likely to talk about it at interview, especially as the topic was not specifically discussed or explored. In addition, the study showed that exercise is a strong initial motivator when encouraging older people to cycle, as are sociability and fun, but the best outcomes are empowerment and improved quality of life.

¹ Zander, A., et al, 2013 Joy, exercise, enjoyment, getting out: A qualitative study of older people's experience of cycling in Sydney, Australia, *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1155/2013/547453>