Want Healthier Seniors? Give Them Bus Passes

Health problems and age go hand in hand. This inevitability is acceptable, but it doesn't have to be such a strong correlation. One universally accepted method to improving the health of older adults is to get them to be more active. An easy way to do that, apparently, is to give them bus passes. For the older adult population in the United Kingdom, simply having free access to the bus can dramatically improve public health, according to a new study published in the American Journal of Public Health.

In 2006, a new system was put in place that gives any person 60 and older a bus pass that allows free local travel on public transit. Researchers from Imperial College London found that those with bus passes were much more likely to take frequent walks and to get around by "active travel" – walking, cycling or using public transit. They also found that these increases in active travel cut across social and economic groups.

The study used data from the UK's National Travel Survey for the four-year period between 2005 and 2008.

Another related study shows that this can be an important way to improve the overall health of older people in the UK. About 20 percent of people over 60 currently achieve their recommended amount of physical activity solely through active travel.

Of the nearly 17,000 people interviewed, about 57 percent reported having a bus pass in 2005. That number jumped to nearly 75 percent by 2008. The cost of the program – £1.1 billion a year – has caused some to call for it to be canceled.

And while these results are a good argument for keeping the program in place, they are also very UK-focused. In the U.S., a similar program might not be able to reach the same goals simply because of the lack of public transit options in many cities and towns. As designers and public officials face growing concerns about the aging U.S. population to be able to "age in place," these results offer a promising path for ensuring the health of older people. But without the community design and public transit access, it's not likely that U.S. cities would be able to see the same results.

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