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Urban design impacts physical activity levels

**One-third of New Zealanders are not getting sufficient exercise
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An Auckland University of Technology (AUT) study has found that New Zealanders exercise more if their neighbourhood urban design encourages physical activity.

Attractive neighbourhoods that are short distances from parks, open space or coastlines provide opportunities for physical activity, while neighbourhoods designed around cul-de-sacs present a barrier to exercise, the study shows.

Lead researcher Nick Garrett told the Public Health Association Conference at Auckland University today that while recent emphasis has been on just getting people moving, "physical environments need to support them to do it, or the novelty would quickly wear thin.

"Although relationships between physical activity and several chronic diseases has been clearly documented, at least 32 per cent of New Zealand adults are not engaging in sufficient levels of physical activity for health benefits," Mr Garrett told the public health delegates.

"Urban designers need to take into account the benefits of walking and other forms of active transport to help improve physical activity levels," Garrett concluded.

Garrett today presented the findings of a three-year Auckland University of Technology study into why people exercise and why they don't.

He said the "Active Friendly Environments" project, a collaboration between Sport & Recreation New Zealand (SPARC), AUT, North Shore City Council and Harbour Sport, found people exercise more if they perceive their neighbourhood as attractive and within easy reach of parks and other open spaces, such as coasts.

“Street connectivity is also important. It must be easy to get to a destination. Lots of cul de sacs, for instance, are not conducive to walking.”

Garrett said he was keen to dig deeper into mixed land use and how it can encourage people to walk.

“North Shore City doesn’t have a lot of areas with mixed land use, including a mix of housing, shops, amenities and cafes in one place so that people can easily walk or cycle from home to work, shopping or other destinations,” said Garrett. “Instead, North Shore City has lots of suburbs that were designed and built for the motorcar, and are not necessarily favourable to pedestrians.

“Most attempts at changing people’s behaviours in recent times have been around changing attitudes toward being physically active and educating people about the benefits of being active,” Garrett added. “But if the physical environment does not encourage, support and sustain that attitude change, any behavioural shift may not last very long.”

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