Walking in the Community: Reducing the Barriers for Older Adults and People with Stroke

The ability to go for a walk around the block, through the park or to the bus stop is something many people take for granted. But what about older adults who are afraid of falling? Or people with stroke whose slow gait means they may not make it to the other side of the crosswalk before the light changes?

For these individuals, community ambulation – the ability to walk outside the home – is compromised. In turn, participation in one’s community is likely to decrease, leading to increased inactivity and reduced social interaction, which could result in fragility and even depression.

Dr. Ruth Barclay, Associate Professor in the Department of Physical Therapy at the University of Manitoba, studies the barriers to community ambulation in older adults and people with stroke. She is convinced that, with intervention, these barriers can be overcome.

“My research focuses on improving health related quality of life for these individuals,” she explains. “If we can encourage people to enhance their abilities in such areas as strength, balance and endurance, they are more likely to have the self-confidence to walk outside their homes, whether it be on the streets or in public indoor environments.”

How Do You Get Where You Want To Go?

Barclay has designed models of participation and community ambulation that incorporate the perceptions of older adults and people with stroke. Where do they want to go? What helps them to get there?

“Models help us to understand how different things are related,” she says. “They give rehabilitation professionals information about where to focus efforts in assessment and intervention based on the client’s goals,” she says.

For example, let’s say someone has a goal of walking to the local store, but an internal barrier is getting in the way: the person is concerned that the distance may be too far for them to manage without tiring. In this case, the physiotherapist may help the person work on muscle strength and endurance so they can confidently negotiate the route.

Other internal barriers to walking outdoors include slow gait speed, anxiety about their walking difficulties and feeling depressed about not being able to go out to walk.

Barriers to community ambulation are not just within the person: they can also be external. Weather, uneven and/or icy surfaces, curbs, steps and changes in elevation are common obstacles. Another is walkability of the neighbourhood. Are there too many people using the sidewalk? Is the lighting adequate? All of these things have an impact on whether or not an individual with mobility difficulties will leave their home to walk outdoors.

Encouraging Outdoor Walking

Barclay’s research has culminated in a unique study called GO-OUT. In it, groups of older adults who have difficulty walking outdoors receive varying methods of encouragement to do so.

One method involves a therapist-led, 10-week/twice weekly walking program in which participants gradually increase their ability to walk outside by addressing the barriers, such as feeling balanced when turning sideways to avoid a child on a bike or feeling comfortable walking while carrying a parcel.

“This is not just ‘let’s meet in the park and go for a walk,’” says Barclay. “GO-OUT is designed to help participants undertake more complicated maneuvers so that, through practice, the barriers to walking outdoors are diminished.”

Barclay hopes that GO-OUT will show the importance of providing interventions that will help older adults and people with stroke to...

participate in their community through getting outdoors.

Go to umanitoba.ca/rehabsciences/Barclay_goddard.html to find out how Ruth Barclay’s research is helping older adults and people with stroke to walk in their communities, improving their health related quality of life.