

## The Getting Older Adults Outdoors (GO-OUT) Study: Evaluating an Outdoor Walking Program in Parks for Older Adults with Difficulty Walking Outdoors

### Executive Summary

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#### Why did we conduct the GO-OUT study?

Active living is important to maintain physical function and prevent mobility decline in older adults [1]. Walking is a popular method of exercise for older adults [2], although many older adults spend minimal days each week walking outdoors [3]. Walking outdoors in nature is associated with positive feelings, increased energy, and decreased depression [4]. Community exercise programs that provide supervised opportunities to practice outdoor walking skills in a park environment can provide the structure needed to safely engage older adults in outdoor walking [5].

#### What was the main goal of the GO-OUT study?

The goal of the Getting Older Adults Outdoors (GO-OUT) study was to compare the effects of two programs on increasing the time spent walking outdoors in older adults with difficulty walking outdoors. We invited participants to a 1-day interactive workshop, and then assigned them (using a process like flipping a coin) to the 10-week Outdoor Walk Group or Weekly Reminders program. The workshop and 10-week programs were run during the summer. At study entry, and 3 and 5.5 months later, participants performed tests of balance and walking, completed questionnaires to evaluate physical and mental health, and wore outdoor walking activity monitors.

#### GO-OUT Study Interventions

##### 1-day Interactive Workshop

**Goal:** Increase knowledge and build skills to safely walk outdoors.

- Participants received an educational workbook and a pedometer to count steps.
- Participants circulated to 8 stations that reviewed:
  1. Canadian physical activity guidelines
  2. Goal setting
  3. Pedometer use
  4. Nordic pole walking
  5. Foot care/footwear and walking pattern
  6. Falls prevention
  7. Monitoring exercise intensity and safety
  8. Postural awareness and balance exercises

##### Outdoor Walk Group Program

**Goal:** Increase skills and confidence to safely walk outdoors.

- One-hour sessions, twice a week, led by a healthcare professional (e.g. physical therapist) and assistants, in local parks
- Each session involved: a warm-up, a distance walk, practice of outdoor walking skills (e.g., walking over uneven ground, walking at increasing distances and speeds, walking up and down hills), a second distance walk, and a cool-down.

- The program was designed to increase in difficulty level from week 1 to week 10.
- Participants wore activity monitors during Outdoor Walk Group sessions in week 3 and 9 of the program so we could measure how fast and far they walked.

### Weekly Reminders Program

**Goal:** Reinforce knowledge and provide reminders to safely walk outdoors.

- Phone call each week to discuss information presented during the workshop and participant experiences walking outdoors.

### Who participated in the GO-OUT study?

A total of 190 older adults participated in Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal. After the workshop, 98 older adults (average age 75 years; 76% female) were assigned to the Outdoor Walk Group, and 92 older adults (average age 74 years; 71% female) were assigned to the Weekly Reminders. Top health conditions were arthritis (67%), high blood pressure (45%), and cataracts (30%) and 25% of people used a walking aid.

Attendance at the 1-day interactive workshop was high (>90%). Attendance at the Outdoor Walk Group was moderate; 67% of participants attended 9-20 sessions, 17% attended 1-8 sessions, and 15% attended 0 sessions. The main reasons for not attending were vacation, and other appointments (e.g., medical). In the Weekly Reminders program, 85% of participants received 9 or 10 out of 10 reminders.

### What were the results of the GO-OUT study?

- The Outdoor Walk Group program **did not increase** the time people spent walking outdoors to a greater extent than the Weekly Reminders program.
- The Outdoor Walk Group **did improve** walking capacity (by increasing confidence to walk indoors and outdoors) to a greater extent than the Weekly Reminders program.
- Exploratory analyses showed that attending a greater number of Outdoor Walk Group sessions related to greater improvement in walking distance and speed.
- From week 3 to week 9, the distance and speed that people achieved during the first walk in Outdoor Walk Group sessions increased from a median of 403 metres to 478 metres, and a median of 0.65 metres/second to 0.74 metres/second, respectively.

### What did people say when they were interviewed about the GO-OUT study?

- Walk group leaders described adjusting activities to align with participants' abilities and preferences, reflecting the flexible nature of the program.
- Interviews with 27 participants revealed two themes described below:

#### **Theme 1: *Holding me accountable to walk more frequently***

- The scheduled and group nature of the Outdoor Walk Group program increased participants' motivation to remain engaged in walking outdoors.
- Regular conversations in the Weekly Reminders program increased participants' motivation to walk.

## **Theme 2: *We walked farther, with more ease and confidence, and we felt better***

- Opportunities to practice walking skills throughout the 10-week Outdoor Walk Group program helped increase participants' confidence in their ability to walk.
- Benefits of the Outdoor Walk Group included social support, being encouraged by the group leaders, and sharing a common goal with peers.

### **What are future directions for this work?**

The Outdoor Walk Group program provided an opportunity for older adults to practice a variety of outdoor walking skills in a group, with supervision, in a park environment. The benefits of the Outdoor Walk Group program, including increasing participants' walking distance and speed during the program, and overall walking capacity, justify taking steps to adapt the program for delivery within community centres that cater to the needs of community-dwelling older adults.

#### References

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