BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Walking to better health

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The design of neighbourhoods and cities has been linked to a number of impacts on human health and wellbeing, with the density and ‘walkability’ of these areas increasingly seen as a causal mechanism that drives, or impedes, physical activity.

Chinmoy Sarkar at the University of Hong Kong and colleagues analysed data from nearly 430,000 individuals of the UK BioBank cohort aged 37–73 years, living in 22 cities across the United Kingdom, to determine the role of the built environment on hypertension. Using footprint-level data, the authors constructed 1-, 1.5- and 2-km catchments to measure walkability scores for the neighbourhoods the individuals lived in, regressed against blood pressure and risk of hypertension. Controlling for physical and

social characteristics in the individuals, the authors found that higher walkability scores within 1 km of where an individual lives is associated with lower blood pressure and lower risk of hypertension, with the effects especially pronounced for women, those between the ages of 50 and 60, those in neighbourhoods with lower socio-economic status, and greener areas; the findings were also consistent in the larger catchments. Walkable areas may not only increase physical activity, but also lower stress levels through a variety of means.

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