Pedestrian walkways need to get more 'respect' so that Malaysians can walk safely and comfortably while getting some exercise.

MOST Malaysians are willing to walk only 250m from their car to where they want to go, says academic Dr Rosilawati Zainol.

So if they run out of milk, sugar or something they need, they would rather drive than walk, no matter how close the shop is to their house.

"We are becoming more and more unhealthy and obese. Physically, we are not getting enough exercise."
She found that Malaysians don't walk outside because they think it is too hot, are afraid of stray dogs and want to avoid snatch thieves.

“But in buildings like shopping malls, Malaysians are willing to walk because they are air-conditioned and have a lot of entertainment.”

This is why planners should incorporate certain elements into their design to make walking more attractive, says Dr Rosilawati.

For one thing, she says, sidewalks need to be wider because people need "social space" when walking.

"If you are with friends, it's okay to be close but when you are walking among strangers you need some space to feel comfortable."

Ideally, she says, sidewalks in residential areas should be around 1.5m while for commercial areas they should be about 3m because there are more people there.

Her study on Jonker Street in Melaka showed that walking in the popular tourist spot is far from ideal as there are shops on both sides but the pedestrian walkway is on only one side of the street.

"The sidewalk is also very narrow and you have people walking in both directions on it. It can't accommodate the flow of people, so many end up walking on the street.

"That is dangerous because there are no zebra crossings or humps to slow down the traffic on the road," she points out, adding,"The best thing to do is to close the road to motorised vehicles and turn it into a public space where people can walk and mingle."

She says sidewalks should always be well maintained and free from obstacles.

“When you are overseas, you can see that the drains on sidewalks are covered but in Malaysia you have to sometimes walk over a drain cover, which can be dangerous. There is very little respect in Malaysia for pedestrian walkways.

“The placing of signboards is a problem, too. Some signboards are only 1.5m which is not a safe height because you can knock right into them while walking,”
powerpots get in pedestrians' way.

And to ensure a comfortable walk, Dr Rosilawati says it is important to provide adequate shade from the hot sun, such as trees or polycarbonate roofing.

"Personally, I prefer trees because they can also reduce carbon emission. If more people walk instead of drive, the air will also be cleaner."

For her, trees should be planted as a buffer between the road and sidewalk to protect pedestrians.

"So if there is an accident where a car loses control and swerves, it hits the tree first rather than a pedestrian," she says. Trees can also help reduce the risk of snatch theft, she says.

Dr Rosilawati says snatch thieves have a "high impact" on whether people are willing to walk.

"People think twice, sometimes thrice, before they go out and walk."

It is necessary to create a buffer between the road and the sidewalk to protect walkers. Bollards can also provide a safe buffer zone, she adds, as well as lamp posts and road signs.

Adequate lighting is essential, says Dr Rosilawati, so that pedestrians are visible to drivers, especially when they are crossing the road.

"Visibility is important. If you cry for help, at least people can see you."

Another important feature for walking is benches or outdoor furniture in strategic areas, she says, as this will allow people to rest when they get tired on their walk.

Dr Rosilawati believes people wouldn't mind walking if there are a lot of activities to keep them occupied along the way.

She says the built environment, recreational behaviour and obesity are all interrelated and policy makers have a role to play in creating an environment that encourages walking and exercise.

"More and more youths are leading sedentary lifestyles. They spend a lot of time in front of their computer and TV. This is worrying because they are getting obese and unhealthy. We need to change this and get them to be active and exercise."

"And walking is the cheapest and easiest way to exercise," she notes.

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