

Physical activity - women

Regular physical activity is vital for good physical and mental health. It helps improve your overall health and fitness, maintain a healthy weight, reduce your risk for many chronic diseases and promote good mental health.

The 'National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians recommend that at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days is required for good health. This is the same for women and men. However, only 54 per cent of Australian women meet these guidelines.

Some of the barriers women face include caring responsibilities, body image and perceptions of safety.

Reasons why women exercise

Women who do exercise regularly say they do so to:

- Improve their physical fitness
- Have fun
- Manage their weight.

Physical activity barriers

Common exercise barriers for Australian women include:

- **Lack of time** – many women juggle child-rearing, household duties and paid work, and don't find time for themselves.
- **Lack of motivation** – some women say they don't feel motivated without a training partner. Others think that, to be useful, exercise must be painful, sweaty and gruelling (which isn't true).
- **Parenting demands** – many women fulfil multiple care-giving responsibilities, including for children and older relatives, and take responsibility for meal preparation and cleaning.
- **Lack of energy** – fatigue is a by-product of a busy lifestyle. Working mothers are often tired.
- **Health conditions** – older women are more likely to have a chronic health condition (for example, arthritis) that limits their participation in some forms of exercise.
- **Lack of money** – women on low incomes are less likely to exercise regularly. This may be because they think that any worthwhile physical activity requires expensive equipment and expensive clothes (it doesn't).
- **Gender stereotyping** – women who believe that child rearing and domestic chores are 'women's work' are less likely to take time to exercise – perhaps because they feel guilty taking time out for themselves.

Tips to overcome exercise barriers

Suggestions include:

- **Lack of time** – try exercise DVDs – so you can exercise whenever you have the chance. Three 10-minute bouts of physical activity over the day has the same health benefits as a continuous 30-minute session.

- **Lack of motivation** – find a training partner; you could ask family or friends. You could also contact your local council or community centre for information on exercise clubs in your area. For example, you could join a local walking group. Don't just think of gyms and jogging. You might find dancing or roller-skating fun.
- **Parenting demands** – try to share child rearing and household chores with your partner or friends. Perhaps your family can help, or maybe paid childcare is an option. Ask friends if they are interested in swapping babysitting.
- **Lack of energy** – regular exercise gives you the energy to better cope with the demands of daily life. If you keep this in mind, it may help you push past the tiredness during your first few weeks of regular exercise.
- **Health problems** – talk to your doctor about appropriate forms of exercise. In most cases, physical limitations don't rule out all activities. For example, exercise in water (such as aqua-aerobics) is possible for many people with arthritis.
- **Lack of money** – exercise doesn't require expensive clothes or a gym membership. One of the most beneficial forms of exercise is also free – brisk walking. Most community centres offer a range of physical activity classes and childcare at modest prices.
- **Gender stereotyping** – think about your beliefs about women's roles. It may be that sexism is one of your barriers. (For example, the old saying, 'Horses sweat, men perspire and women gently glow' illustrates the stereotype that exercise isn't appropriate for women.)

Making the changes

If you have a medical condition, are overweight, over 40 years of age or haven't exercised regularly for a long time, see your doctor for medical advice before increasing your physical activity levels.

Regular exercise is more likely if you plan ahead. Suggestions include:

- Identify your barriers, such as lack of money or motivation. Think about a range of possible solutions.
- Consider the personal beliefs that may be holding you back, such as guilt about taking time out. Challenge those beliefs. Help your family realise your needs are as important as theirs.
- Find a support group – perhaps your partner, extended family, friends or paid childcare.
- Find something you like to do. You're more likely to stick with it if you choose an activity you enjoy than if you do it because it's 'good for you'.
- Look through your diary for the week and make exercise 'appointments' with yourself.
- Set achievable goals. Don't fall victim to the 'all or nothing' mentality. If you can only find the time for one or two exercise sessions per week at the moment, congratulate yourself on this achievement. Every little bit helps and some exercise is significantly better than no exercise at all.

Incidental exercise

A few minor changes to your daily lifestyle can also increase your physical activity level. Suggestions include:

- For short trips, walk instead of taking the car.
- Get the whole family active on the weekends. The range of free activities is only limited by your imagination but could include bushwalking, cycling around the neighbourhood, swimming at the beach or playing backyard cricket.

It is never too late to take up exercise

Don't think you've left it too late to start. Studies show that older people can achieve significant health benefits after just two to three months of regular exercise. As an added bonus, if you start being regularly active, your body will continue to benefit from exercise well into your 80s.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Local community centre.

Things to remember

- About 39 per cent of Victorian women aren't active enough and more than 12 per cent are completely sedentary.
- Common exercise barriers include lack of time, lack of motivation, low income and parenting demands.
- If you have a medical condition, are overweight, over 40 years of age or haven't exercised regularly for a long time, see your doctor for a check-up.

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Physical Activity Australia

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