

Females and physical activity

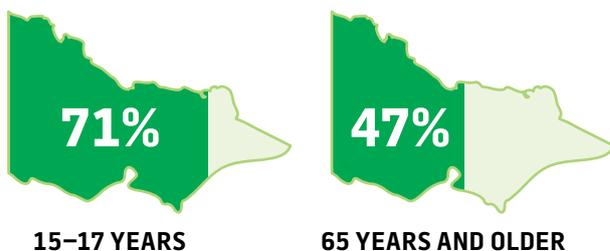
What the research shows

Most females don't do enough physical activity to benefit their health and wellbeing¹. There are many barriers that reduce or stop them being active, with the 'fear of judgement' a unifying barrier across all life stages². While this issue is complex, the good news is there are many steps that can be taken to help females overcome barriers to activity, so they can lead happier, healthier lives.



1 in 3 women aged 25 years and older believes sporting clubs are not welcoming to people like them¹²

Participation in sport and active recreation by Victorian females declines as females get older⁴



41% of Victorian women feel too embarrassed to exercise in public compared with 26% of men¹²

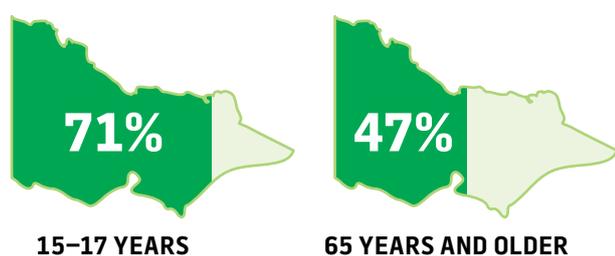
Flexible opportunities and supportive environments are key to increasing participation



The state of play



Participation in sport and active recreation by Victorian females declines as females get older⁴



Research shows that:

- more than two-thirds of adult Australian females are sedentary or have low activity levels¹
- fewer females than males do the recommended amount of physical activity each week⁵
- females face more barriers to being physically active than males do⁵.

This is a significant problem, because physical activity is one of the most important factors for promoting good health and preventing chronic disease.

VicHealth is on a journey to help Victorian females become more active. We have identified some of the barriers females face when it comes to physical activity, and some ways to help them overcome these barriers, so they can enjoy better health and wellbeing.

Understanding barriers to physical activity in females

Research shows that the more barriers a female perceives, the less likely she is to be active.^{6,7,8} Many barriers are common to all females, including:

- time
- money
- confidence in ability
- concerns about appearance
- knowing what to do
- awareness of and access to opportunities
- sociocultural restraints, such as language, clothing, dietary requirements and the belief females shouldn't be active².

These barriers manifest differently at different life stages^{8,9,10,11}. For example, a girl might be less active because she doesn't have an income to pay for activity or free time to exercise due to school commitments, but a mother might be less active because she doesn't want to spend money or time on herself instead of on her family.

Two key areas VicHealth is looking to address are limited opportunities and unwelcoming environments. Across these, lies the fear of judgement.

Limited opportunities

Without a variety of affordable, accessible and available opportunities, which are designed specifically with females in mind, it can be difficult for females to be active.

Young girls, mothers and retirees may not have money to pay for activities or memberships. They may also have little spare time to exercise because of commitments to family, friends, domestic duties, study and work. Or they may find when they do have time to be active, activities they are interested in are not available.

“

I wouldn't want my kids to be cared for just so I could go to the gym. I'd feel a bit weird about that. I'd rather be available for my kids and be the main carer, and fit in the exercise around other things.”

Limited opportunities may also relate to ability and skill level. Some areas may only offer activities for females who are experienced in competitive sport or are highly skilled, which limits opportunities for inexperienced females who just want to get fit and have fun.

Unwelcoming environments

Physical and social environments can be major barriers to females being active.

Physically, females may feel uncomfortable or intimidated. This may be due to location, facilities (e.g. changing rooms and toilets), lighting or room layout.

For example, open activity spaces and large groups may make females feel exposed or 'watched'.

'Norms' associated with spaces also influence how women feel about activity. For example, if women don't know or understand what is expected in a particular environment, such as an exercise class or weights room, they may worry about doing the wrong thing and being judged for it.

Women also report feeling judged if they don't feel like they belong in a space. They may look at others in the space and worry they don't look the same or have different ability and skill levels.

“

It felt uncomfortable, a bit awkward. I think it was the fact that the people that were at the gym had obviously been doing it for a long time, and they all looked great. I was a bit self-conscious of the way I looked. It was the way I felt compared to them, and my understanding of what to actually do in the gym and how I looked doing different activities.”

Socially, females may feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, isolated or judged. This may be because they don't know what is involved or expected in an activity, or they worry they don't belong because of their appearance, skill or ability. Or it may be because they don't want to exercise alone, or staff or other participants are unwelcoming.

“

I remember my very first class, they put too many women in the room and there was not enough equipment. I ended up not getting a piece of equipment. It was my first class and I had no idea what I was doing, and then I had the wrong equipment. I felt really lost and the personal trainers weren't very helpful.

I think if, when I walked in, the personal trainer running the class came up to me and said, “Oh, I haven't seen you before. This is what's going to happen...”, or even if one of the other women tried to help... I was there with every intention of being more active, but I really struggled with that feeling of judgement and not feeling like I belonged.”

Cultural differences may also create an environmental barrier, with some cultures preferring males and females to be separated, or requiring culturally appropriate facilities.

The unifying barrier: fear of judgement

VicHealth research has found that fear of judgement is the one barrier to physical activity that is consistent across all female life stages¹².

Judgement may be real, with actual experiences of judgement, such as being called 'fat', or perceived, where people think someone is judging them².

It can make females feel embarrassed, intimidated and self-conscious about their appearance, abilities and priorities (see **The judgement pillars** on page 4)². This can lead to them becoming disengaged from activity, so they reduce or even stop activity². It can also stop inactive females becoming active, and females who have been active before, starting activity again².

In addition, fear of judgement may lead some females to change their appearance or behaviour. For example, they may dress differently, exercise alone instead of in a class, or change activity classes, location or times².



1 in 3 women aged 25 years and older believes sporting clubs are not welcoming to people like them¹²



41% of Victorian women feel too embarrassed to exercise in public compared with 26% of men¹²



One in four women worries about getting changed in front of others when exercising or playing sport¹³

“

I've always had people question what I'm exercising for, like they would say, “You're already skinny!” or as I've gotten older, “What are you still playing netball for? You're too old!” That does make me question whether I should still play or be active.

I was coming down the stairs after a class... and the girls at the desk were talking, and one said to the other, “Oh, I didn't expect to see fat ass here again,” not about me, but about one of their clients. Even though I had never felt judged prior to that, I thought, “Well, what are they saying about me?” Women judge and it's awful.”

The judgement pillars: what females fear being judged about²

Appearance	Ability	Priorities
<p>Being judged for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being sweaty • having a red face • not looking like I usually do (made up) • changing in front of others • wearing tight clothing • wearing the wrong clothing • showing my body • how my body looks during exercise (jiggling) • not appearing feminine • developing too many muscles. 	<p>Being judged for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not being fit enough • not being good enough • not being competitive/serious enough • not knowing the rules • not knowing what equipment to bring • bringing the wrong equipment • holding back the group • being too good • being seen as too competitive/serious. 	<p>Being judged for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spending time exercising when time with family should be more important • spending time exercising when time with friends should be more important • spending time exercising when time studying/working should be more important • spending time exercising when there are other things I should be doing that are more important.

Helping females be more active

There are many ways to overcome barriers to physical activity in females, and increase their health and wellbeing. Here are just a few ideas.

Increasing opportunities

Offer flexible activities

Females need flexible opportunities to be active, so they can fit it around their busy lifestyles and competing demands^{8,9,16}.

Consider offering a variety of activities at different times. Activities that run for short periods of time and at different locations (e.g. close to workplaces, schools and public transport) will also make it easier for females to attend.

Offer different activities

Females prefer flexible, non-organised activity, such as yoga, walking, cycling, swimming and gyms, over organised sport or recreational clubs¹⁴. Offering different kinds of activities will give women and girls more opportunities for activity.

Offer activities for different skill levels, abilities and goals

Females prefer exercising with others with similar skill levels, abilities and motivations as them, and with diverse cultural backgrounds, ages, body shapes and sizes². By offering a variety of activities, females can find the right fit for them and are more likely to stay active.

Consider offering introductory, beginner and advanced sessions for different age groups and cultural backgrounds, training for different goals (e.g. general fitness, fun or competition); and mother and baby activities.

Offer inclusive activities

Females from minority groups or with disabilities may find it difficult to be active. Create opportunities that are accessible to socially and culturally diverse groups. This might include female-only classes, classes run in another language, and classes designed for females with disabilities, such as those [Diverse Does](#) and [MEGA](#) offer.



In Victoria, four times as many females (44%) choose to participate in non-organised, flexible physical activity offerings than organised physical activity (9%)¹⁵

Work with representatives from different groups to make sure staff are properly trained in relevant sensitivities and requirements, and can appropriately motivate and guide females.

Improving the environment

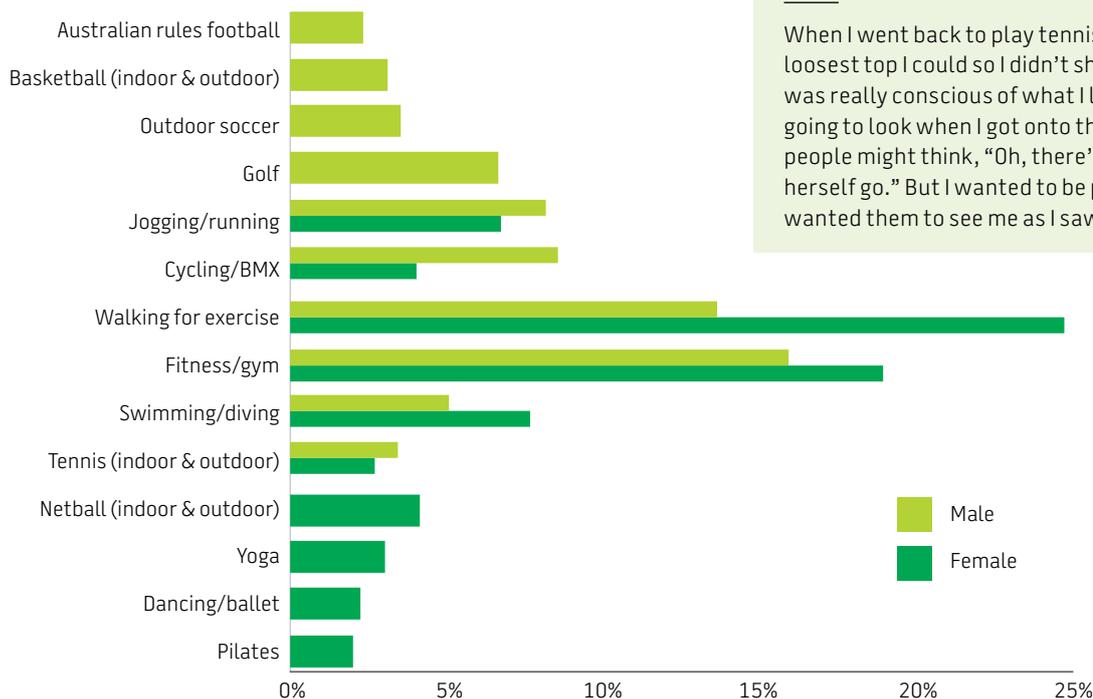
Create a positive social environment

Social interaction is a key motivating factor for being active for all females¹⁶. Therefore, creating an inclusive, supportive, welcoming and fun environment is vital for increasing and maintaining their activity levels.

Run events, such as breakfasts, morning or afternoon teas, or walking groups for new mothers, to facilitate a sense of community and connection. Buddy systems that pair up females, like the one [Swell Mamas](#) offers, can also encourage connection.

Being active with family or friends gives females support and alleviates the sense of vulnerability and judgement they may feel^{16,17}. Encourage them to bring family and friends to activities, for example by offering 2-for-1 or group discounts.

Most popular activities, by gender¹⁴



“
When I went back to play tennis, I was trying to find the loosest top I could so I didn’t show my fat stomach. I was really conscious of what I looked like and how I was going to look when I got onto that tennis court. I thought people might think, “Oh, there’s someone who has let herself go.” But I wanted to be perceived as fit and agile, I wanted them to see me as I saw myself 10 years before.”

“
Having my friend there was really important. Just having that person that you already know, with you, can add a protective factor. At least you know one person there and you’re not going to be standing there all by yourself.”

Create a supportive environment

It’s important for females to feel encouraged, valued and like they can keep up with the group². They also need to know what is involved in the class and how to play the game or use the equipment².

People working in gyms or running group activities should welcome new attendees, introduce themselves and give information as needed so the new attendees feel like they belong.

“
Pretty much every single person there said “Hello” at my first session and at the end of it said, “Good job!” If you ever look lost or forget where you’re up to, someone is always there next to you going, “We’re up to this bit,” or we have a laugh about forgetting what we’re doing. It’s always been very comfortable and welcoming.”

Create female-friendly environments

Consider females’ needs when designing or updating activity spaces, such as parks, leisure centres/gyms, courts and pools². For example, improving facilities, such as lighting, security and private and family changing rooms, and offering childcare, hair driers and well-lit mirrors, can help women feel safer, more comfortable and welcome.

Changing the layout of activity spaces, such as adding doors, partitions or curtains, or using private rooms for classes, can make females feel less exposed and judged when exercising. Running smaller groups also helps females feel less exposed.

In addition, having female-only staff, classes and gyms may help females feel more comfortable and encourage them to be more active.

Create family-friendly environments

Mothers might find it difficult to take time away from their families for activity². Offer groups and activities that can involve babies and children, such as walks or classes, which have the bonus of encouraging children to be active too.

Swell Mamas, Bowling with Babies and MEGA are great examples of organisations that include children in activities.

Need more inspiration?

Below are links to more information about physical activity projects that promote activity among females in Victoria and around the world. Each project uses a variety of tools to successfully overcome barriers to physical activity.

Initiatives like these can help make long-lasting changes that support and encourage activity among females.

- [Active Moreland](#)
- [Bowling with Babies](#)
- [Circus Oz’s Strong Women program](#)
- [City of Melton Bollywood dance classes](#)
- [Diverse Does](#)
- [Escaping Your Comfort Zone](#)
- [MEGA](#)
- [No Lights, No Lycra](#)
- [Swell Mamas](#)

Extra resources

- [Female participation in sport & physical activity: a snapshot of the evidence](#)
- [This Girl Can: Helping women and girls get active guide](#)
- [This Girl Can – Victoria: One Year On video](#)
- [Sport and Recreation Victoria: Female-friendly sport infrastructure guidelines](#)
- [Vicsport: Welcoming sport environments](#)
- [Hear more about women’s experiences when getting active](#)

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