Female participation in sport & physical activity

A snapshot of the evidence

Females of all ages generally have lower physical activity participation rates than males. Increasing physical activity levels for females is important for health and mental wellbeing.

Understanding and addressing the barriers preventing more female participation in physical activity is complex. Evidence shows that gender and the needs of females should be considered when developing specific physical activity opportunities.

Trend: Participation levels

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

Trend: Non-organised/organised activity levels

In Victoria, statistics show four times as many females (44%) are choosing to participate in non-organised or more flexible physical activity offerings compared to organised physical activity (9%).

Female participation through sporting or recreational clubs is lower compared to males.

Trend: Activity levels

More than two-thirds of adult Australian females were classified as being sedentary or having low levels of exercise.

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Motives for females to get physically active

• Compared to men, women place more importance on the social aspects of physical activity, and are less motivated by performance outcomes, such as building strength14.
• Motives to participate can change and evolve over time. For example, a woman may begin physical activity for health reasons, however find enjoyment in the social aspect or mental wellbeing and continue for those reasons16,17,18,19.
• Key motivations include maintaining or improving health20, appearance and weight management16, personal fulfilment16, wellbeing and improving quality of life16 and social interactions14.
• Younger women (18-35) have been found to be more motivated by appearance, weight loss and peer pressure compared to older women21, however conversely can be hampered by societal expectations of body image13.
• Older women are predominantly motivated by health outcomes20.

Health benefits of physical activity for women

Even having a low level of physical activity is better for health than not being active at all.5

Participation in sport and physical activity can provide females with the following benefits:
• prevention and management of disease, such as: coronary heart disease, strokes, type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer’s Disease and dementia5,7,8,9
• increased health, fitness, body and bone strength10,11,12
• weight loss and prevention of obesity7
• reduced risks of mortality5
• increased mental health and improved wellbeing13
• increase in social connections and enjoyment14,15.

Influencers on physical activity

• Addressing the barriers can have a greater influence on females being more active, compared to promoting the benefits of physical activity22.
• Reducing the perception of, or the actual barriers could be necessary to increase participation. The more barriers a female perceives the less likely she is to engage22,23,24.
• Not all females are the same and some may experience different barriers and challenges to others. Certain barriers can affect a female more at different life stages13,24,25,26.
Physical activity across life stages

**Girls & adolescents**
- Having fun with friends\footnote{31}
- Improving their skills\footnote{32}
- Family activity, parents involved in physical activity\footnote{17}
- Improve body image\footnote{31}

**Women 18-55 years**
- Younger women motivated by improving their appearance and weight management\footnote{11}
- Social over performance outcomes\footnote{14}

**Motivations**
- Family (parent) support:  
  - logistics, transport and organisation\footnote{26, 27, 29, 54}
  - emotional support, praise and encouragement\footnote{26, 27, 29, 54}
  - financial\footnote{26, 27, 29, 54}
  - peer support and encouragement\footnote{54}
- Adolescents:  
  - time constraints with academic activities, social activities, and paid employment\footnote{25, 56, 40}
  - during adolescence, girls’ priorities shift toward spending social time with friends, doing household chores and concentrating on school work. Physical activity becomes less of a priority during adolescence\footnote{15, 56}
  - influenced by self-concept, confidence levels and perception of skills in comparison to peers\footnote{26, 56, 57}
  - influenced greatly by body image and experience greater drop-out during adolescent due to social and peer pressures on appearance\footnote{18}
- Time constraints and shifting responsibilities related to:  
  - study  
  - work  
  - domestic and family duties\footnote{13}
- Perception that daily activities do not leave enough time to exercise\footnote{24}
- Feeling tired\footnote{24}
- Not wanting to exercise alone\footnote{24}
- Cost and inflexibility of payment structures, and inflexible time structures\footnote{13}
- Obese women can feel their weight is a barrier to physical activity as it inhibits their energy level, confidence, and ability to participate\footnote{17}
- Intimidated by the gym environment\footnote{13}
- Perceived barriers for 18–55 year old women decrease as they become more active, women who are more active, perceive less barriers\footnote{24}
- Lack of time\footnote{21, 32, 33}
- Family support\footnote{15, 22, 33}
- Family priority for time and money\footnote{21, 32, 33}
- Guilt about spending time away from family and spending family resources on themselves\footnote{21, 22, 33}
- Understanding what exercise to undertake at what stage of pregnancy\footnote{24, 63}

**BARRIERS**
- Fewer barriers than other female age groups\footnote{10, 24}
- Understanding what exercise to undertake at what age and ability level\footnote{20}
- Fear of injury\footnote{20}
- Perceived lack of ability\footnote{20}
- Existing health problems\footnote{24}
- Long term sedentary patterns\footnote{20}
- Perceived age barrier\footnote{20}
- Fatigue\footnote{20}
- Perceived lack of ability\footnote{20}
- Existing health problems\footnote{24}
- Long term sedentary patterns\footnote{20}
- Perceived age barrier\footnote{20}
- Confusion, knowledge and belief in their own ability\footnote{20, 28, 54, 56, 57}
- Lack of motivation\footnote{18, 24}
- Time\footnote{13, 18, 24, 25, 32, 33, 56, 60}
- Finances\footnote{18, 26, 27, 29, 54, 31, 33}
- Fatigue\footnote{24}
- Knowledge of what physical activity to undertake\footnote{23, 25, 65}
- Awareness and access to opportunities\footnote{14, 62} particularly for rural areas\footnote{58}
- Perceiving activities such as watching TV as more relaxing and instantly rewarding\footnote{13}
- Sociocultural restraints can include:  
  - perception girls/women should not participate in physical activity\footnote{10}
  - language, religious wear\footnote{34, 45}
  - previous physical activity experience\footnote{66}
  - facilities do not cater for gender segregation or food requirements\footnote{30, 45, 46}

**Motives**
- Low levels of self-motivation, as priority is on their family rather than themselves\footnote{13, 33}
- Can be motivated by weight management\footnote{31} and personal wellbeing\footnote{33}
- Communicating the benefits of physical activity could potentially motivate mothers, such as being a positive role model within their family\footnote{33}
- Health outcomes\footnote{20}
- Social interaction\footnote{79, 14}

**Older women 55+ years**
- Health outcomes\footnote{20}

**Females of all ages (summation)**
- Social interaction\footnote{79, 14}

Continues
CONSIDERATION FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

Girls & adolescents

- Skill building through training sessions or short courses designed as ‘introduction’ to sporting activity
- Creating opportunities where adolescent girls can participate in physical activity with similar skilled peers and in gender groups or, if mixed, ensure it is a supportive environment
- Create activities which require little financial outlay for equipment. They can potentially borrow or hire equipment or it be provided by activity co-ordinator
- ‘Girls only’ programs will reduce peer pressure and issues related to self-image
- Co-ordinate programs where girls and boys can participate in activities at same time (yet separately), reducing the time constraints and logistical barriers for parents
- Create activities which facilitate whole family involvement
- Extend awareness and education of the importance of physical activity and the potential barriers for girls to teachers, family, role models and peers so that they can support girls’ participation and reduce drop-out rates

Women 18-55 years

- Flexibility with cancellations and payment
- Locations for physical activity need to be within or close to work, study, or home
- Create short or express activities which can be done during lunch breaks
- Flexible social based, such as walking groups
- Include education elements to physical activity programs which include time-management skills and self-empowerment

Mothers

- Child care facilities available or fun activities for children which would alleviate guilt
- Incorporate children into activity
- Unstructured and flexible activities, such as walking groups
- For structured activities, having no cancellation fees and flexible payment options
- Education of suitable activities for pregnant women
- Flexible hours that physical activity is available and range of physical activity activities which fit into work day
- Provide resources which support physical activities at home, such as exercise programs, health and diet information, pedometers and diaries to track activity and maintain motivation
- Take a ‘whole of family’ approach to create a program children, mothers and potentially partners can all participate or be included

Older women 55+ years

- Scheduled routine of activities
- Education on health benefits and overcoming illness
- Social element
- Outdoors
- Consider walks around gardens

Females of all ages (summation)

- Providing activities at flexible times, and creating flexible payment options. Free introductory courses to increase confidence and remove cost and investment barriers
- Work in partnership with key target groups (cultural or religious groups)
- Ensure program facilitators are educated and trained on cultural sensitivities or requirements and are focused on motivating and supporting females
- Create inclusive physical and cultural environments
- Create opportunities for non-participating women to be included, such as volunteering

Continues
Girls & adolescents

• Promote the benefits of girls’ involvement in physical activity to parents, teachers and role models. Particularly promote the potential for stress reduction and improved study.
• Promote the social element of programs to girls; the fun, excitement and time with friends. Consider promoting programs to whole social groups, families and schools by perhaps offering discounts to bring a friend or sister.
• Promote the skill-building elements of the program and emphasise it is not about performance or competition.

Women 18-55 years

• Marketing should focus on the social and enjoyment benefits of the program. For obese women, marketing the social enjoyment and other benefits to physical activity, as opposed to weight loss, may reduce the expectations and pressure women place on themselves.
• Communicate and educate the importance of physical activity to those within a mothers’ support group (partners, family, work etc.) to encourage their support, both logistical (such as looking after children) and emotional.
• Include easy-to-read health information about what activities are safe at what stage of pregnancy and motherhood.
• Communicate health education and physical activity messages during the program by SMS and phone rather than rely on personal contact.
• Promote and educate the benefits of short or low impact physical activity (such as walking or gardening).
• Promote relevant and timely information specific to this group with consideration for overcoming illness or health concerns.
• Promote the social element and a scheduled routine.
• Promote the accessibility of the physical activity and ensure participants’ activities will be achievable for their age group and ability.

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Females of all ages (summation)

• Throughout promotion material use ‘real’ images that females can relate to and “see themselves” doing. This improves their self-concept and gives them a belief they can do the activity.
• Extend this to include diverse images of religious or cultural groups, particularly for cultures where religious headwear is necessary and female only areas.

Summary: When designing and promoting your program

Do

• Consider partnering with other community groups who access your target market or can provide physical activity in locations and settings close to work, school or home.
• Include your target market in the creation of programs to give them a sense of control and involvement. This will also allow you to identify particular motives or barriers that need to be addressed.
• Consider the particular barriers your target market faces, and design and promote a program that can overcome these.
• Consider the motivations of your target group and promote details of how you will deliver on these motivations through your activity.
• Educate and make aware of the opportunities of the most appropriate physical activity for your target group.
• Include general information on how to live a healthy lifestyle. For example: dietary requirements, healthy eating and opportunities of how to fit physical activity into a person’s daily routine.
• Design programs which build skills.
• Use images which are easily relatable to your target market.

Don’t

• Don’t discriminate based on gender. Girls and women can be interested in all types of PA.
• Don’t focus only on the participants. Educating families (parents, partners, extended family) and role models (teachers, peers, cultural and religious leaders) about the benefits and necessities of female physical activity could increase their level of support for girls and women participating.
• Don’t limit accessibility to physical activity activities. If location, time or transport is a barrier, design programs which could be delivered in a work or school setting, or outside.
• Don’t focus only on weight-related benefits; women can get disheartened if their weight-loss goals are not quickly achieved. Instead consider and promote the social, mental and wellbeing benefits of physical activity as well as the wider health benefits.
• Don’t limit your innovation. Consider technology to improve monitoring (e.g. pedometers) and communication tools to reach and keep in contact with females (mobile phone SMS, email, mail out programs and information, phone calls).

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References


