



Women's Health East

Women and Physical Activity

Regular physical activity is important for good physical and mental health. It helps to improve overall health and fitness, maintain a healthy weight, reduce the risk of many chronic diseases and promote good mental health.^{1,2}

Physical activity is defined as:

*"Any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure"*³

The Australian National Physical Activity Guidelines for both men and women recommend that adults be active on most, preferably all, days every week.⁴ The Guidelines recommend an accumulation of 2 ½ - 5 hours of moderate intensity physical activity or 1 ¼ - 2 ½ of vigorous intensity physical activity each week, along with muscle strengthening activities on at least 2 days each week. The Guidelines also focus on reducing sedentary behaviour (prolonged sitting) and breaking up long periods of sitting as much as possible.⁴

Only 41% of Australian women are achieving sufficient levels of physical activity for health benefit.⁵ Physical activity is a gendered issue because the context of women's lives can impact on their ability to participate in regular physical activity. According to Women's Health Victoria, "change needs to occur at the societal level to address current gender roles and how they can limit women's ability to be physically active and maintain health".⁶

Health Benefits

The health benefits of physical activity are widely acknowledged and include:

- The prevention of chronic disease such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers, including bowel and breast cancer^{7,8,9}
- Lower blood pressure and cholesterol
- Maintenance of a healthy weight
- Improved mental health and wellbeing
- Improved sleep
- Improved muscle strength and bone mass^{2,9,10}

Regular physical activity has been shown to relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety while improving mental health and wellbeing.^{6,10} It does this through increasing energy levels, acting as a distraction from daily worries, increasing social contact and altering serotonin, endorphin and stress levels in the brain to lift mood.¹¹

Social connection is a key benefit of physical activity, and often motivates women's continued participation in physical activity while also improving mental health.^{6,12} Group exercise is found to be a means of social support, especially for older women.¹³ Regular physical activity has additional benefits for older women as it aids muscle strength, aerobic capacity, the reduction of fracture risk and facilitates the maintenance of independence over time.^{10,14}

Inadequate levels of physical activity in women and girls are linked to obesity which can contribute to a number of interrelated health issues. These include earlier onset of puberty,¹⁵ polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS),¹⁶ gestational diabetes,¹⁷ type 2 diabetes,⁹ cardiovascular disease⁷ and osteoporosis.¹⁸

Some groups of women experience additional barriers to physical activity. These groups include:

- Indigenous Australian Women
- Women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Same-sex attracted women
- Older women⁶

Barriers to physical activity

Women face numerous barriers to being physically active, including:

- **Lack of time**¹² – Work and study commitments contribute to a lack of physical activity for 19% of Australian women.¹⁹ In addition, juggling household duties, paid work and childrearing can mean that many women don't find time to exercise.^{1,6}
- **Multiple care-giving responsibilities** – This includes caring for family and taking responsibility for household duties.¹ Fourteen percent of Australian women cite family commitments as a constraint for sport or physical recreation - almost twice the number of males.¹⁹
- **Existing health conditions** – Older women especially are more likely to have a chronic health condition that can limit their ability to exercise.^{1,6}
- **Lower socioeconomic status (SES)** – Low SES women are less likely to likely to exercise regularly than those with a higher SES due to barriers such as less public transport, perceptions of safety, cost and lack of facilities in low SES areas.^{1,20} They often do not experience the additional benefits of physical activity, such as social interaction, and are more likely to have negative perceptions of physical activity.⁶

Other gender-specific considerations:

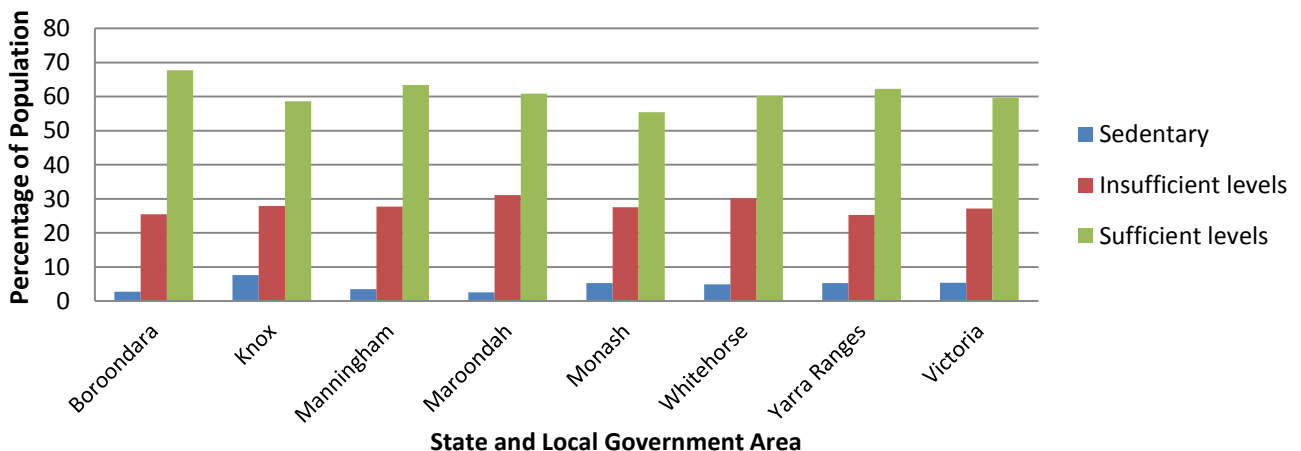
- Gender stereotyping can lead some women to believe that child rearing and domestic chores are 'women's work' which can mean they are less likely to exercise, perhaps due to feelings of guilt about taking time out for themselves.¹
- Women can feel uncomfortable undertaking physical activity in public areas because of sexist attitudes, unwelcoming spaces for women, and expectations about women's 'place', i.e. in the home and caring for others rather than themselves.²⁰
- Body image perceptions can inhibit some women from participating in sports and physical activity.⁶ Overweight women often experience the additional barrier of discrimination, which can lead to withdrawal from physical activity.⁶

Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR)

Findings for the Victorian Population Health Survey 2008²¹ show that:

- Females in Boroondara (67.7%) are most likely to spend sufficient time on physical activity through the week to achieve benefits. Females in Maroondah (31.1%) are most likely to spend insufficient time being physically active.
- Females in the region are generally less likely than men to spend sufficient time on physical activity through the week to achieve health benefits (especially in Knox and Monash). The exceptions are in Manningham and Yarra Ranges where females are slightly more likely than males to spend sufficient time on physical activity.²²

Levels of Physical Activity for Females, 2008 EMR LGA's and Victoria²¹



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