

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, and reduce the risk of many chronic diseases.^{1,2}

The Australian National Physical Activity Guidelines recommend that adults be active on most, ideally all, days every week.³ They also recommend reducing sedentary behaviour (prolonged sitting).³ In Victoria 52% of women aren't active enough and over 4% are sedentary.⁴ 2014-15 data for Australian women show that only 53.3% met the national Guidelines.⁵

While all Australians face barriers to being physically active, gender greatly influences engagement in physical activity, and the context of women's lives can impact on their ability and motivation to participate in regular physical activity.

Health impacts

Regular physical activity has been shown to relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety while improving mental health and wellbeing, which makes it particularly important for women and girls as they are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression.^{22,6} Benefits to physical activity occur through increasing energy levels, facilitating social contact, decreasing stress hormone levels, and altering serotonin and endorphin levels in the brain to lift mood.⁷

Social interaction is a key benefit of physical activity for women, and often motivates their continued participation while also improving mental health.^{9,22} Group exercise is found to be a means of social support, especially for older women.⁹ Regular physical activity has additional benefits for older women as it aids muscle strength, aerobic capacity, the reduction of fracture risk, and through this, facilitates the maintenance of independence over time.^{6,10}

Inadequate levels of physical activity are linked to obesity which can contribute to interrelated health issues in women and girls. These include polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS),¹¹ gestational diabetes,¹² type 2 diabetes,¹³ cardiovascular disease¹⁴ and osteoporosis.¹⁵

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 women¹¹

A gendered issue

Women face a number of gender specific barriers to being physically active:

- **Family and domestic duties**, such as caring for family and taking primary responsibility for household duties, can impact on women's physical activity. Fourteen percent of Australian women cite family commitments as a constraint for sport or physical recreation - almost twice the reported number of men.¹⁶
- **A lack of access to areas and public spaces that feel safe, welcoming and inclusive** for women to be physically active.¹⁷
- **Gender stereotyping** can lead some women to believe that child rearing and domestic chores are 'women's work' and that their place is in the home and caring for others rather than themselves.^{1,21,22} This can mean they are less likely to exercise, perhaps due to feelings of guilt about taking time out for themselves.⁹

- **Sexist attitudes** about the way women look - that they must always be 'put together' and not sweaty or messy - can lead to **negative body image perceptions** which inhibit some women from participating in sports and physical activity.^{9,18,19} Overweight women often experience the additional barrier of discrimination, which can lead to withdrawal from physical activity.²⁰
- Other points that can discourage women and girls' participation in sport are the **underrepresentation of women in leadership positions** within sporting organisations, low media and television coverage of women's sport, less financial rewards and sponsorship opportunities available to women elite athletes compared to men, restricting and uncomfortable uniform requirements and a lack of access to appropriate sporting facilities.^{21,22} VicHealth reports that females participate in sport at only half the rate of males, a trend that tracks from childhood to adulthood.^{21,22}

Overcoming barriers to physical activity

Peak women's health body Women's Health Victoria states that "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".⁸ There has been some significant progress nationally, state-wide and in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) in addressing the barriers to physical activity faced by women and girls.

VicHealth's powerful *This Girl Can - Victoria* campaign encourages women to get active by addressing the obstacles that stop them from being so, particularly lack of confidence or fear of judgement. It supports women and girls to embrace any type of physical activity that feels right for them, regardless of how they may look or what others may think.¹⁸ Additionally, the Victorian Government program *Change Our Game* focuses on promoting women in leadership in the sports sector, and increasing sport and recreation participation by women through a number of initiatives.²³ The development of the Australian Football League Women's (AFLW)²⁴ also marked a monumental cultural shift for Australian sport. It has encouraged women to challenge the status quo and pursue a career in AFL, and has so far inspired thousands of women and girls to take up football.

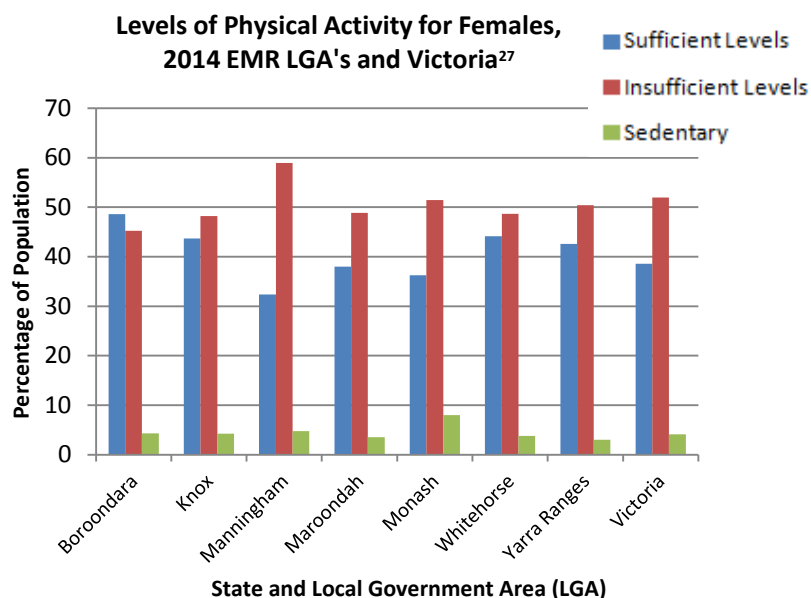
Regionally, a number of organisations across the EMR have prioritised sport and recreation as a setting for action around gender equity. Initiatives have included the development of a gender equity self-assessment tool for sporting clubs, a short film which showcases local clubs who are promoting gender equality, and an online resource about the practical actions sporting clubs can undertake to promote and normalise gender equality.^{25,26}

Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) Data

Findings from the Victorian Population Health Survey 2014²⁷ show that in Victoria, a higher proportion of men undertook adequate physical activity compared to women (44.1% to 38.6%).⁴

In the EMR:

- Females in Boroondara (48.6%) are most likely to engage in sufficient physical activity. Females in Manningham (59%) are most likely to be insufficiently active. Females in Monash are the most likely to be sedentary (8%).
- Females are generally less likely than men to undertake sufficient physical activity (especially in Boroondara and Manningham). The exceptions are in Maroondah, Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges where females are slightly more likely to be meeting the physical activity guidelines.



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