



ACTION AREA 10 – Older people

Support healthy and active ageing

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Increasing levels of physical activity is one of the most important steps older adults (defined here as age 65+, or 55+ for indigenous people) can take to improve and maintain their physical, social and mental health, and quality of life.



WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

In 2017, 15% of Australia's population of 25.3m million people were over 65 years of age. By 2047, this proportion is projected to increase to 22%, and because today's 65-year olds can expect to live (on average) another 21 years, there will be proportionally more 'older-old' people (>85 years).⁽¹⁾ In light of the known contributions of physical activity to the prevention and management of chronic disease, maintenance of functional status, and the preservation of physical independence in ageing, it is now even more imperative to promote physical activity for healthy ageing.

The definition of 'older people' generally relates to those over the age of 65 years, and to those over the age of 55 years for the Indigenous population. However, people in these age groups have a variety of physical and cognitive capabilities, characterised by relatively good physical function in the 'young old' to sometimes severe impairment in the frail elderly. It is important, therefore, to tailor strategies to reflect these diverse capabilities.

Consider the case for change:

- increasing levels of physical activity is one of the most important steps older adults (defined here as age 65+, or 55+ for indigenous people) can take to improve and maintain their physical, social and mental health, and quality of life⁽²⁾
- although 7 in 10 older people rate their own health as good, very good or excellent, more than half have chronic health problems.⁽¹⁾ There are demonstrated benefits of physical activity for both preventing, or delaying the onset of, and managing a range of these chronic health problems (including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, musculoskeletal conditions, mental health problems, dementia, and some cancers)^(2, 3)

- 1 in 5 older people have a disability in the form of a severe or profound core activity limitation.¹ Regular multicomponent and muscle strengthening activities (ranging from conventional aerobic and resistance training, to numerous other forms of exercise, including sport, yoga, tai chi, dancing, virtual reality training etc) can improve and maintain both physical and cognitive function, improve social connectedness, prevent falls, maintain capacity to independently cope with activities of daily living in old age^(4,6)
- in 2014–15, 35% of people aged 65 and over reported being sufficiently active (doing more than 150 minutes of physical activity over 5 or more sessions) during the preceding week (compared with 48% of 18–64 year olds). More than one quarter (28%) reported doing no physical activity at all.⁽⁷⁾ In 2004–2005, only 15% of older Indigenous Australians (55+ years) met the current physical activity guidelines (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health survey).⁽⁸⁾ More recent data suggest that older Indigenous people spend more time walking for transport (19 minutes/day on average) than non-Indigenous people the same age (10 minutes/day).⁽⁹⁾ Data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health show a decline of more than 50% in the prevalence of meeting physical activity guidelines between 75 and 87 years⁽¹⁰⁾
- if older people do not have the capacity to meet physical activity guidelines, lower volumes of activity (and light intensity activity) will help to prevent and manage health problems and improve quality of life.⁽⁵⁾ Higher volumes and higher intensity will lead to more benefits
- in addition to lack of regular physical activity, sedentary behaviour may also impact negatively on health. Older people spend more time watching television than their younger counterparts and objective measures of sedentary time show increasing sedentary time with increasing age.^(11, 12)





WHAT MUST BE DONE?

As the numbers of older people in the population will increase at an unprecedented rate over the next 20 years, innovative population efforts to promote greater levels of physical activity in this group will be required, both for older adults' individual health and quality of life, and as a strategy to reduce the rising costs of health, disability and aged care services. A whole system multi-strategy plan to promote physical activity, prevent loss of muscle strength, and maintain good balance among older adults must include individual, social, environmental and policy strategies that are appropriate to age and function.^(6, 13)

Current evidence suggests that interventions to promote physical activity among older adults are generally effective in the short term, but that there is uncertainty around the most beneficial intervention components and longer-term effects (12 months). Tailored strategies with a combination of cognitive behavioural strategies, focusing on increasing light-moderate physical activity are most effective. In addition, strategies should take into account specific factors that are meaningful to older adults, such as social and environmental support, and the enjoyment of being physically active.⁽¹³⁾

The following strategies are recommended:

Implement policies that support older people to live physically active lives:

- develop, implement and fund an integrated and comprehensive Active Older Australians strategy to increase levels of physical activity (including sport and recreational activities, and active transport) among all older Australians, including Indigenous older people, Veterans, and people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This is important as 33% of our current older population were born overseas; two thirds of these in a non-English speaking country⁽¹⁾
- encourage governments to enhance the capability and capacity of community organisations and primary-care providers and their staff, to support the delivery of age-appropriate, accessible and affordable evidence-based physical activity programs, as a means of both reducing chronic disease risk, contributing to the management of existing conditions, and increasing social networks
- implement planning guidelines that account for the variety of mobility and functional capabilities of older adults when designing road crossings, pedestrian infrastructure, public transport access, public open space and recreational infrastructure, as well as when designing retirement and aged-care housing⁽¹⁴⁾
- introduce policy mechanisms to mandate the delivery of physical activity programs in aged-care services and settings.



Plan, develop and retrofit environments to provide older people with more opportunities to participate in physical activity:

- to promote wider uptake of walking, implement the strategies contained in *Action area 1 – Built environments* but with a focus on encouraging older people to walk (e.g. benches for resting, access for people with walking aids, low traffic areas, and easy access to shops and services)
- in residential aged-care settings, promote activity-permissive environments by providing safe and aesthetically pleasing walking paths, shade and weather protection, and other facilities that will encourage both walking and a range of other physical activities.⁽¹⁴⁾

Implement social and community interventions that support older Australians to live more active lives:

- as social support is a key determinant of both healthy ageing and physical activity in older people, encourage participation in community groups that offer social and physical activities (e.g. Heart Foundation Walking). This may improve social wellbeing, especially following significant life events in older age such as retirement, moving-house, or bereavement, when social networks may change^(15, 16)
- design health, sport and recreation centre programs to meet the needs of young-old, mid-old and older-old people, including offering a variety of opportunities to improve aerobic fitness, muscle strength, flexibility and balance; encourage better use of existing infrastructure and organisations, especially sports clubs, by retaining existing older members and encouraging new ones⁽¹⁷⁾
- provide community-based programs that meet the needs of older adults and increase motivation, reduce barriers and build community connections; include a wide range of activities, for example, walking groups (with and without poles to aid balance and prevent falls), seniors swim clubs, water aerobics classes, dance classes and Tai Chi/ Qigong⁽¹⁸⁻²²⁾
- improve access to community-based or in-house programs, including virtual reality training (exergaming) in all residential aged care facilities.^(23, 24) Programs should be targeted to all residents, including those in nursing homes⁽²⁵⁾
- implement home-based physical activity interventions, with support by telephone (e.g. monitoring and physical activity counselling), video or internet (e.g. live feedback during exercise); these can be as effective as supervised exercise programs and may be an option for helping housebound older people to be more active⁽²⁶⁾
- train health professionals to help older people, especially those with health problems or mobility restrictions, to become more active. Strategies may include health coaching,⁽²⁷⁾ referral to an exercise professional or to an evidence-based physical activity program, or use of technology to cue regular breaks from sitting⁽¹¹⁾

Help older individuals to understand the health benefits of living a more physically active life and of breaking up prolonged sitting time:

- design and implement a mass-media campaign tailored to the needs and motivations of older adults in accordance with age, and physical and cognitive capacity. Promote images of active older people as role-models for healthy ageing.



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