



4.8 Insufficient physical activity

Regular physical activity is important for optimal health and wellbeing. It reduces the risk of many chronic conditions (such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes) and other disease risk factors such as overweight and obesity and high blood pressure. Strength and resistance training is also important to achieve and keep good health as it improves muscle strength and bone density, protecting against injury and osteoporosis.

Insufficient physical activity is a key risk factor contributing to disease burden in Australia. Given the role it plays in chronic conditions, it is important for Australians to achieve the optimal levels of physical activity recommended in Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines (Department of Health 2017). See Chapter 4.4 'Contribution of selected risk factors to the burden of disease' for more information on the health impact of insufficient physical activity.

Physical activity by age group

Based on self-reported data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics National Health Survey, in 2014–15, 56% of adults aged 18 and over were not sufficiently active (ABS 2015).

After adjusting for age, the proportion of adults aged 18 and over who reported completing less than the recommended amount of physical activity decreased over time, from 49% in 2007–08 to 44% in 2014–15 (ABS 2017).

Children and young people (aged 2–17)

In 2011–12, an estimated 39% of children aged 2–5 did less than the recommended 180 minutes of physical activity each day; 74% of children aged 5–12 and 92% of young people aged 13–17 did not complete 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day (ABS 2013).

Adults (aged 18–64)

In 2014–15, an estimated 52% of adults aged 18–64 did less than the recommended 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity, or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity physical activity, across 5 or more sessions each week. An estimated 70% of adults did no strength-based activities. Only 19% of adults aged 18–64 did the recommended amount of physical activity and strength-based training (ABS 2016).

Older people (aged 65 and over)

In 2014–15, for older Australians (aged 65 and over), an estimated 75% did not do 30 minutes of moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity on at least 5 days each week. Among people aged 65–74, 72% of women were insufficiently active; this increased to 92% for people aged 85 and over. For men aged 65–74, 73% were insufficiently active, and this was similar for people aged 85 and over (74%) (ABS 2015).

Physical activity guidelines:



each day

2–5 years



each day

5–12 and 13–17 years



over 5 sessions per week

18–64 years



on at least 5 days per week

65 years and older



Types of physical activity

Physical activity can be sport and leisure activities, household chores, working or active travel. Some common forms of physical activity include swimming, tennis, golf, gym activities and bushwalking. The three most popular organised sport and physical activities by age group according to the Australian Sports Commission's AusPlay survey for 2016–17 (ASC 2017) are presented here.

Three most popular organised sport and leisure physical activities:



Children aged 5–11^(a)

1. Swimming (39%)
2. Football/soccer (19%)
3. Australian football (12%)



Young people aged 12–17^{(a)(b)}

1. Football/soccer (22%)
2. Basketball (15%)
3. Netball (15%)



Adults aged 18–64

1. Recreational walking (41%)
2. Fitness/gym activities (36%)
3. Athletics (including jogging) (18%)



Older Australians aged 65+

1. Recreational walking (62%)
2. Fitness/gym activities (26%)
3. Swimming (12%)

(a) Data on participation for children aged 0 to 14 are reported by parents and relate to organised out-of-school sports and activities.

(b) Data on participation for children aged 15 to 17 are self-reported and relate to both organised and non-organised sports.

According to self-reported data from the National Health Survey, in 2014–15, walking was the only form of physical activity for 40% of adults aged 18–64:

- 16% walked for transport as their only type of physical activity
- 11% walked for exercise only
- 13% walked for both exercise and transport as their only type of physical activity.

Physical activity across population groups

Physical activity rates varied across population groups. Based on self-reported data from the National Health Survey, in 2014–15, 60% of adults aged 18–64 living in *Outer regional* and *Remote* areas of Australia were insufficiently active compared with 50% in *Major cities*. Physical activity rates for adults aged 18–64 also varied with socioeconomic area; 63% of adults in the lowest socioeconomic area were insufficiently active, compared with 40% in the highest socioeconomic area (ABS 2016).

In 2012–13, more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 and over living in non-remote areas were insufficiently active compared with non-Indigenous Australians of the same age living in the same areas (64% compared with 56%) (ABS 2014).



What is missing from the picture?

There is a lack of data to monitor long-term trends in physical activity levels among different groups, especially young children. Surveys that collect comprehensive physical activity data, such as the total amount of time and frequency of physical activity completed, are administered infrequently. The 2011–12 National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey (a component of the 2011–13 Australian Health Survey) is the most recent survey with data of this comprehensive nature and is only a single time point.

Current data collected in physical activity surveys do not capture occupational physical activity (that is, physical activity done as part one's job) or activity due to household chores, which could contribute to a large part of adult physical activity. Furthermore, the data are self-reported and are therefore prone to misreporting. When measured data are captured (for example, pedometer steps), there are no standardised methods.

Using discrete categories for reporting on physical activity, such as against the Australian Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines, is also a limitation because it does not take into account the relationship between extra health benefits gained and increases, however small, in activity levels.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on physical activity is available on these AIHW websites:

- <www.aihw.gov.au/reports/biomedical-risk-factors/risk-factors-to-health/contents/insufficient-physical-activity>
- <www.myhealthycommunities.gov.au/national/abs0055>.

The report *Impact of physical inactivity as a risk factor for chronic conditions: Australian Burden of Disease* is available for free download.

References

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