

Barriers to physical activity

Three in five Canadians are not active enough to benefit their cardiovascular health.¹ Nine in ten do not follow the desirable pattern of activity, which calls for being active for a minimum of 30 minutes every other day, at a moderate intensity or greater.² What prevents them from being more active?

The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute investigated barriers to physical activity when it conducted the 1995 Physical Activity Monitor. More than 2500 Canadians were asked “How important is each of the following in keeping you from maintaining your physical activity?” Those who answered “important” or “very important” to any of the 15 barriers included were considered to be experiencing the barrier.

Table 1 presents the 15 barriers in order of importance and categorizes them according to whether they are major (experienced by more than 50% of Canadians), moderate (experienced by more than 25% of Canadians), or minor (experienced by less than 25% of Canadians).

For the general population, lack of time, lack of energy, and lack of interest or motivation are the major barriers to maintaining physical activity. All three major barriers are specific to the individual. Among the moderate barriers, most are also personal: excessive cost, long-term illness, disability or injury, feeling uncomfortable, lack of skills, and fear of injury. Only one, lack of the right type of facilities nearby, pertains to the physical environment.

Table 1

| BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY | | |
|-------------------------------|----|-------------|
| Barrier | % | Type |
| <i>Major barriers</i> | | |
| Lack of time | 69 | Individual |
| Lack of energy | 59 | Individual |
| Lack of motivation | 52 | Individual |
| <i>Moderate barriers</i> | | |
| Excessive cost | 37 | Individual |
| Illness/injury | 36 | Individual |
| Lack of facilities nearby | 30 | Environment |
| Feeling uncomfortable | 29 | Individual |
| Lack of skill | 29 | Individual |
| Fear of injury | 26 | Individual |
| <i>Minor barriers</i> | | |
| Lack of safe places | 24 | Environment |
| Lack of child care | 23 | Environment |
| Lack of a partner | 21 | Environment |
| Insufficient programs | 19 | Environment |
| Lack of support | 18 | Environment |
| Lack of transportation | 17 | Environment |

1995 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

Less frequently experienced barriers relate more to the individual's physical and social environment. They include lack of safe places, lack of programs, instructors, and coaches, problems with transportation, problems with child care, lack of a partner to exercise with, and lack of support from family and friends.

Barriers and activity level

Are barriers different for active and inactive people? Table 2 lists nine barriers that are clearly more important for inactive Canadians. Six of these barriers are related to personal



factors, namely lack of motivation and interest, a perceived lack of necessary skills, lack of energy, fear of injury, long-term illness and injury, and feeling uncomfortable. An additional two barriers relate to social support factors—problems with child care and lack of support from family and friends. Finally, lack of safe places, along with fear of injury, suggests a relatively higher concern for personal safety among the inactive.

Table 2

| BARRIERS DISTINGUISHING ACTIVE AND INACTIVE CANADIANS | | |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|
| Barrier | Inactive < 0.5 KKD | Active ≥3 KKD |
| Lack of motivation | 66 % | 45 % |
| Lack of skill | 43 | 23 |
| Lack of energy | 66 | 50 |
| Fear of injury | 36 | 22 |
| Problems with child care | 34 | 21 |
| Long-term illness or injury | 48 | 37 |
| Feeling uncomfortable | 38 | 27 |
| Lack of safe places | 32 | 21 |
| Lack of support | 25 | 15 |

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Sex differences

Women are more inclined than men to report 10 of the 15 barriers to physical activity. Table 3 lists these barriers according to the magnitude of difference between men and women. The largest differences occur with lack of skill, lack of safe places, and lack of energy. Other substantial differences were observed for lack of motivation, long-term illness or injury, and fear of being injured. The barriers not shown on the list, including lack of time, are equally important for men and women.

Taken together, these findings indicate that personal factors and concern for personal safety and well-being are relatively more important issues for women than for men in maintaining an active lifestyle.

Table 3

| BARRIERS DISTINGUISHING MEN AND WOMEN | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|------|
| Barrier | Women | Men |
| Lack of skill | 35 % | 22 % |
| Lack of safe places | 30 | 17 |
| Lack of energy | 65 | 53 |
| Lack of motivation | 57 | 47 |
| Illness/injury | 41 | 31 |
| Fear of injury | 31 | 21 |
| Feeling uncomfortable | 33 | 25 |
| Excessive cost | 40 | 33 |
| Lack of programs | 22 | 15 |
| Lack of a partner | 24 | 19 |

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Age differences

Barriers also differ across age groups. As shown in Table 4, lack of time and cost are much more important for younger adults and adults in their middle years than they are for Canadians aged 65 and older.

Conversely, long-term illness or injury and fear of injury are far more prominent among older age groups. Lack of skill is also ranked higher among older Canadians, particularly among women aged 45 and older.

Child care is important only for men and women between 25 and 44 years of age, whereas social-environmental factors—such as lack of facilities, lack of safe places, lack of transport, lack of a partner, and lack of programs—are relatively more important for young Canadians aged 18 to 24.

Table 4

| TOP 10 BARRIERS AMONG AGE GROUPS | | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 18-24 | 25-44 | 45-64 | 65+ |
| Time | Time | Time | Energy |
| Energy | Energy | Energy | Motivation |
| Motivation | Motivation | Motivation | Illness/injury |
| Cost | Cost | Illness/injury | Fear injury |
| Facilities | Child care | Skill | Skill |
| Ill at ease | Facilities | Ill at ease | Time |
| Illness/injury | Illness/injury | Cost | Ill at ease |
| Safe places | Ill at ease | Fear injury | Facilities |
| Transport | Fear injury | Facilities | Cost |
| Partner | Skill | Partner | Safe places |

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Lack of facilities and lack of transport are mentioned more frequently by young men than by young women in this age group. On the other hand, young women are twice as likely as young men to report lack of safe places as a barrier.

Family composition

Additional analyses were conducted to examine possible differences in barriers for people with and without children at home.

Social factors, such as problems with child care, lack of a partner, and lack of support from family and friends, are mentioned more often by men and women between the ages of 25 and 44 who have children at home than by people of the same age who do not have children at home. Indeed, almost half of people in this age group who have children report problems with child care.

Education level, income, and community size

Complex interactions exist between factors such as education, community size, and income. First, education and community size are related to age. People with the least education and those living in small rural communities tend to be older than those with higher education levels and those living in larger centres. Second, household income is related to education, with those in higher income brackets being more likely to have college and university education.

People with lower levels of education are more likely to report barriers such as lack of energy, lack of motivation, cost, fear of injury, feeling uncomfortable, lack of a partner, lack of safe places, lack of social support, and problems with transport.

People living in smaller communities with populations under 10,000, particularly those under the age of 45, are more likely than others to report lack of facilities and lack of programs, instructors, and coaches as barriers to physical

activity. Lack of social support is also more of an issue for people living in smaller communities, particularly those aged 45 and older. Lack of skill, long-term illness or injury, feeling uncomfortable, and lack of transport are other barriers more prominent in this group.

Where income is concerned, those in the highest household income bracket (\$80,000 or more) are generally less likely to report barriers to maintaining their physical activity levels. There is one exception: lack of time, which is equally important for all income groups.

People in lower income brackets report more personal barriers, such as cost, lack of energy, lack of skill, long-term illness or injury, lack of motivation, and feeling uncomfortable. They also report more social and environmental barriers, such as lack of safe places, lack of transport, lack of a partner, problems with child care, and lack of support from family and friends.

Too much work or play?

It is not immediately clear to what extent major barriers such as lack of time are dictated by individuals' life circumstances, or by their failure to manage time effectively, or by a subjective and cultural perception of physical activity as "play"—something that can be legitimately undertaken only after the far more "important" business of paid work, family chores, and daily living has been taken care of.

Seemingly contradicting this cultural stereotype of physical activity is the equally widespread notion of physical activity as work. The generalized perception of lack of energy and long-term illness or injury as barriers to physical activity, even among younger Canadians, reflects the belief that physical activity decreases rather than increases energy, and that it exacerbates rather than attenuates health problems.

These beliefs about the role of physical activity need to be addressed if a change in population behaviour is to be achieved.

Removing barriers

- Emphasize social linkages, social support, and the provision of appropriate, low-cost opportunities and facilities for physical activity, especially for younger Canadians living in smaller communities and Canadians in lower income groups.
- Build physical skills, self-efficacy, and self-confidence in older adults. Educate and reassure them about safe ways to be active.
- Provide appropriate support, both psychological and physical, to people with long-term illnesses and injuries that may be perceived as limiting participation.
- Identify innovative and inexpensive ways to increase social support for Canadians throughout the years of child rearing. Help them resolve problems related to child care, lack of support, and juggling family and leisure activities. For example, offer activities for adults and children at the same time.
- Encourage women, particularly young women, to participate more fully in physical activity through programs and policies that aim to increase self-efficacy and physical skills and teach personal safety skills. Provide greater social support and adequate, safe environments in which to be active.
- Create a supportive social and physical environment to help the least active build physical skills and self-efficacy for physical activity. Educate them about physical activity, as well as the joys and benefits of a physically active lifestyle.

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References

- ¹ Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. (1996). How active are Canadians? *Progress in Prevention*, Bulletin no. 1.
- ² Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. (1996). Patterns of physical activity. *Progress in Prevention*, Bulletin no. 2.

Published in June 1996

Barriers to physical activity ¹

1995 Physical Activity Monitor

| | Lack of time | Lack of energy | Lack of motivation | Excessive cost | Illness/injury |
|----------------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|
| TOTAL, ADULTS (18+) | 69% | 59% | 52% | 37% | 36% |
| women | 69 | 65 | 57 | 40 | 41 |
| men | 69 | 53 | 47 | 33 | 31 |
| 18–24 | 80 | 59 | 54 | 47 | 36 |
| women | 77 | 67 | 60 | 50 | 36 |
| men | 83 | 51 | 49 | 45 | 36 |
| 25–44 | 77 | 61 | 52 | 41 | 30 |
| women | 79 | 67 | 57 | 44 | 35 |
| men | 76 | 56 | 47 | 38 | 25 |
| 45–64 | 62 | 55 | 50 | 29 | 42 |
| women | 65 | 62 | 55 | 35 | 48 |
| men | 59 | 49 | 44 | 22 | 36 |
| 65+ | 35 | 58 | 53 | 23 | 50 |
| women | 32 | 63 | 56 | 23 | 54 |
| men | 40 | 51 | 49 | – | 44 |
| EDUCATION LEVEL | | | | | |
| Less than secondary | 66 | 67 | 60 | 42 | 53 |
| Secondary | 68 | 61 | 54 | 39 | 33 |
| College | 70 | 60 | 54 | 41 | 35 |
| University | 72 | 51 | 43 | 28 | 28 |
| HOUSEHOLD INCOME | | | | | |
| < \$20,000 | 57 | 63 | 57 | 47 | 43 |
| \$20,000–29,999 | 66 | 68 | 55 | 42 | 38 |
| \$30,000–39,999 | 68 | 60 | 54 | 36 | 38 |
| \$40,000–59,999 | 76 | 57 | 50 | 38 | 33 |
| \$60,000–79,999 | 73 | 58 | 45 | 31 | 30 |
| \$80,000–99,999 | 73 | 41 | 43 | 25 | 36 |
| ≥ \$100,000 | 68 | 49 | 47 | 21 | 18 |
| EMPLOYMENT STATUS | | | | | |
| Full-time worker | 77 | 58 | 47 | 34 | 27 |
| Part-time worker | 69 | 62 | 55 | 43 | 37 |
| Unemployed | 72 | 59 | 53 | 50 | 40 |
| Homemaker | 74 | 68 | 62 | 51 | 55 |
| Student | 74 | 62 | 61 | 44 | 42 |
| Retired | 32 | 54 | 54 | 25 | 51 |

¹ Percentage who cite barrier as “important” or “very important.”

– Data unavailable because of insufficient sample size.

(cont'd)

| | Lack of time | Lack of energy | Lack of motivation | Excessive cost | Illness/ injury |
|--|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| COMMUNITY SIZE | | | | | |
| < 1,000 | 63% | 59% | 54% | 32% | 43% |
| 1,000–9,999 | 71 | 61 | 53 | 37 | 40 |
| 10,000–74,999 | 69 | 55 | 52 | 39 | 34 |
| 75,000–299,999 | 72 | 55 | 49 | 39 | 32 |
| ≥ 300,000 | 67 | 59 | 50 | 32 | 31 |
| FAMILY COMPOSITION | | | | | |
| <i>Living with a partner</i> | 71 | 58 | 49 | 35 | 35 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | 79 | 57 | 47 | 41 | 30 |
| <i>without children at home</i> | 63 | 58 | 52 | 29 | 39 |
| <i>Widowed, divorced, separated</i> | 51 | 63 | 56 | 37 | 47 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | 76 | 63 | 51 | 51 | – |
| <i>without children at home</i> | 45 | 63 | 57 | 33 | 51 |
| <i>Never married</i> | 74 | 61 | 56 | 41 | 35 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | 69 | 60 | 57 | – | – |
| <i>without children at home</i> | 74 | 61 | 56 | 41 | 35 |
| ENERGY EXPENDITURE | | | | | |
| <i>Active (≥3 KKD¹)</i> | 68 | 50 | 45 | 34 | 37 |
| <i>Moderately active (1.5–2.9 KKD)</i> | 70 | 60 | 51 | 36 | 33 |
| <i>Somewhat active (0.5–1.4 KKD)</i> | 75 | 68 | 58 | 42 | 33 |
| <i>Sedentary (<0.5 KKD)</i> | 62 | 66 | 66 | 39 | 48 |
| ACTIVITY PATTERN | | | | | |
| ≥ <i>Every other day</i> | 68 | 55 | 50 | 34 | 37 |
| ≥ <i>Twice a week</i> | 74 | 65 | 49 | 39 | 29 |
| < <i>Twice a week</i> | 73 | 67 | 64 | 47 | 40 |

1 Kilocalories/kilogram of body weight/day; an energy expenditure of 3 KKD is equivalent to walking one hour every day.

– Data unavailable because of insufficient sample size.

(cont'd)

| | Lack of facilities | Feeling uncomfortable | Lack of skill | Fear of injury | Lack of safe places |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| TOTAL, ADULTS (18+) | 30% | 29% | 29% | 26% | 24% |
| women | 31 | 33 | 35 | 31 | 30 |
| men | 29 | 25 | 22 | 21 | 17 |
| 18–24 | 37 | 36 | 26 | 20 | 28 |
| women | 34 | 44 | 34 | 21 | 37 |
| men | 40 | 29 | 18 | 20 | 19 |
| 25–44 | 31 | 26 | 24 | 25 | 23 |
| women | 32 | 33 | 29 | 30 | 29 |
| men | 30 | 19 | 19 | 20 | 18 |
| 45–64 | 23 | 29 | 36 | 27 | 23 |
| women | 25 | 30 | 46 | 35 | 29 |
| men | 22 | 28 | 24 | 19 | 16 |
| 65+ | 27 | 32 | 37 | 38 | 22 |
| women | 32 | 27 | 39 | 39 | 26 |
| men | – | 39 | 35 | 36 | – |
| EDUCATION LEVEL | | | | | |
| Less than secondary | 36 | 46 | 48 | 40 | 36 |
| Secondary | 30 | 28 | 28 | 25 | 25 |
| College | 27 | 29 | 26 | 25 | 22 |
| University | 27 | 19 | 17 | 19 | 16 |
| HOUSEHOLD INCOME | | | | | |
| < \$20,000 | 38 | 36 | 35 | 29 | 30 |
| \$20,000–29,999 | 28 | 28 | 34 | 28 | 27 |
| \$30,000–39,999 | 34 | 30 | 34 | 33 | 24 |
| \$40,000–59,999 | 29 | 27 | 28 | 23 | 24 |
| \$60,000–79,999 | 26 | 28 | 21 | 18 | 14 |
| \$80,000–99,999 | 32 | – | – | 28 | – |
| ≥ \$100,000 | – | 22 | – | – | – |
| EMPLOYMENT STATUS | | | | | |
| Full-time worker | 26 | 23 | 22 | 22 | 19 |
| Part-time worker | 31 | 25 | 30 | 23 | 27 |
| Unemployed | 42 | 37 | 35 | 31 | 27 |
| Homemaker | 43 | 48 | 48 | 47 | 45 |
| Student | 43 | 41 | 34 | 25 | 30 |
| Retired | 26 | 33 | 36 | 34 | 23 |

– Data unavailable because of insufficient sample size.

(cont'd)

| | Lack of facilities | Feeling uncomfortable | Lack of skill | Fear of injury | Lack of safe places |
|--|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| COMMUNITY SIZE | | | | | |
| < 1,000 | 39% | 32% | 31% | 28% | 23% |
| 1,000–9,999 | 41 | 34 | 35 | 31 | 30 |
| 10,000–74,999 | 22 | 27 | 25 | 23 | 18 |
| 75,000–299,999 | 24 | 26 | 25 | 24 | 21 |
| ≥ 300,000 | 25 | 25 | 22 | 21 | 21 |
| FAMILY COMPOSITION | | | | | |
| <i>Living with a partner</i> | 28 | 28 | 29 | 26 | 23 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | 29 | 27 | 25 | 25 | 24 |
| <i>without children at home</i> | 26 | 28 | 31 | 27 | 23 |
| <i>Widowed, divorced, separated</i> | 28 | 34 | 38 | 35 | 28 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | 30 | 30 | 28 | 38 | 33 |
| <i>without children at home</i> | 28 | 35 | 40 | 34 | 27 |
| <i>Never married</i> | 35 | 31 | 25 | 22 | 23 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | – | – | – | – | – |
| <i>without children at home</i> | 34 | 30 | 23 | 22 | 21 |
| ENERGY EXPENDITURE | | | | | |
| <i>Active (≥3 KKD¹)</i> | 29 | 27 | 23 | 22 | 21 |
| <i>Moderately active (1.5–2.9 KKD)</i> | 28 | 28 | 26 | 25 | 21 |
| <i>Somewhat active (0.5–1.4 KKD)</i> | 31 | 32 | 35 | 30 | 28 |
| <i>Sedentary (<0.5 KKD)</i> | 34 | 38 | 43 | 36 | 32 |
| ACTIVITY PATTERN | | | | | |
| ≥ <i>Every other day</i> | 28 | 27 | 25 | 25 | 21 |
| ≥ <i>Twice a week</i> | 28 | 31 | 32 | 28 | 26 |
| < <i>Twice a week</i> | 37 | 37 | 40 | 30 | 33 |

1 Kilocalories/kilogram of body weight/day; an energy expenditure of 3 KKD is equivalent to walking one hour every day.

– Data unavailable because of insufficient sample size.

(cont'd)

| | Lack of child care | Lack of a partner | Insufficient programs | Lack of support | Lack of transportation |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| TOTAL, ADULTS (18+) | 23% | 21% | 19% | 18% | 17% |
| women | 25 | 24 | 22 | 19 | 19 |
| men | 21 | 19 | 15 | 16 | 15 |
| 18–24 | 17 | 26 | 25 | 20 | 28 |
| women | – | 28 | 25 | 23 | 24 |
| men | – | 25 | 25 | – | 31 |
| 25–44 | 33 | 20 | 20 | 14 | 13 |
| women | 36 | 23 | 24 | 15 | 15 |
| men | 30 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 12 |
| 45–64 | 11 | 23 | 14 | 19 | 15 |
| women | – | 28 | 18 | 22 | 20 |
| men | – | 18 | – | 17 | – |
| 65+ | – | 15 | 13 | 22 | 21 |
| women | – | 17 | – | 24 | 26 |
| men | – | – | – | – | – |
| EDUCATION LEVEL | | | | | |
| Less than secondary | 24 | 26 | 27 | 33 | 26 |
| Secondary | 24 | 22 | 21 | 17 | 19 |
| College | 25 | 22 | 16 | 15 | 15 |
| University | 20 | 18 | 12 | 9 | 11 |
| HOUSEHOLD INCOME | | | | | |
| < \$20,000 | 25 | 27 | 24 | 26 | 31 |
| \$20,000–29,999 | 22 | 21 | 22 | 20 | 17 |
| \$30,000–39,999 | 24 | 22 | 18 | 19 | 15 |
| \$40,000–59,999 | 26 | 23 | 20 | 16 | 15 |
| \$60,000–79,999 | 23 | 22 | 10 | 16 | – |
| \$80,000–99,999 | – | – | – | – | – |
| ≥ \$100,000 | – | – | – | – | – |
| EMPLOYMENT STATUS | | | | | |
| Full-time worker | 21 | 20 | 15 | 14 | 13 |
| Part-time worker | 23 | 26 | 21 | 17 | 16 |
| Unemployed | – | – | 27 | 25 | 26 |
| Homemaker | 49 | 31 | 34 | 31 | 31 |
| Student | – | 29 | 32 | 21 | 23 |
| Retired | – | 17 | 14 | 21 | 19 |

– Data unavailable because of insufficient sample size.

(cont'd)

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|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| COMMUNITY SIZE | | | | | |
| < 1,000 | – | 23% | 28% | 25% | 17% |
| 1,000–9,999 | 25 | 23 | 25 | 25 | 19 |
| 10,000–74,999 | 23 | 22 | 13 | 15 | 13 |
| 75,000–299,999 | 24 | 20 | 17 | 11 | 15 |
| ≥ 300,000 | 19 | 19 | 13 | 13 | 16 |
| FAMILY COMPOSITION | | | | | |
| <i>Living with a partner</i> | 26 | 21 | 18 | 17 | 13 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | 38 | 22 | 21 | 18 | 14 |
| <i>without children at home</i> | – | 20 | 15 | 16 | 13 |
| <i>Widowed, divorced, separated</i> | 20 | 25 | 17 | 21 | 25 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | 41 | – | – | – | – |
| <i>without children at home</i> | – | 24 | 16 | 20 | 27 |
| <i>Never married</i> | 12 | 20 | 21 | 16 | 23 |
| <i>with children at home</i> | – | – | – | – | – |
| <i>without children at home</i> | – | 19 | 19 | 14 | 21 |
| ENERGY EXPENDITURE | | | | | |
| <i>Active (≥3 KKD¹)</i> | 21 | 19 | 17 | 15 | 15 |
| <i>Moderately active (1.5–2.9 KKD)</i> | 19 | 19 | 18 | 17 | 17 |
| <i>Somewhat active (0.5–1.4 KKD)</i> | 26 | 26 | 21 | 19 | 16 |
| <i>Sedentary (<0.5 KKD)</i> | 34 | 26 | 21 | 25 | 24 |
| ACTIVITY PATTERN | | | | | |
| ≥ <i>Every other day</i> | 21 | 19 | 18 | 16 | 15 |
| ≥ <i>Twice a week</i> | 22 | 25 | 16 | 15 | 17 |
| < <i>Twice a week</i> | 31 | 26 | 23 | 24 | 23 |

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