



Fact Sheet 26

Physical Activity in Rural Australia¹ JANUARY 2011

The lack of physical activity is the fourth leading cause of disease and a major public health concern in Australia. Latest statistics show that only 30 per cent of the Australian population have sufficient physical activity for health benefits. People living in rural and remote parts of Australia have even lower physical activity levels than those in major cities.

Regular physical activity provides a wide range of health benefits, including a reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, some cancers, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and obesity. Physical activity also promotes psychological wellbeing and has been shown to add disability-free years to life.

Definition of physical activity

The World Health Organisation defines physical activity as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure. Thus, physical activity includes leisure-time exercise as well as activity undertaken at work and while commuting. A minimum amount of physical activity is necessary in order to derive health benefits. In Australia the National Physical Activity Guidelines recommend that adults engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, but preferably all, days. Moderate-intensity physical activity is that which makes a person work hard enough to raise the heart rate while still being able to carry on a conversation. Examples include brisk walking, jogging, swimming, cricket and dancing.

Prevalence of physical activity in Australia

Australia may be a sports-loving nation but its citizens engage in low levels of physical activity. The National Health Survey 2007-2008 reported that only 28 per cent of Australians aged 15 years

and more had moderate to high exercise levels. This is a major public health concern. Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) show that physical inactivity was the fourth leading cause of burden of disease, responsible for around 8,600 deaths a year. A 2007 report by Medibank Private estimated that if more people were physically active for 30 minutes a day, the Australian healthcare system could save \$1.5 billion annually. For these reasons the National Preventative Health Strategy included the promotion of physical activity as one of its key action areas.

The picture in rural Australia

AIHW figures indicate that, compared with people in metropolitan areas, those living in regional and remote areas were 1.16 times more likely to be sedentary. Surveys in rural Victoria and South Australia showed that only 30 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women were able to meet the physical activity guidelines. Although rural residents are often perceived as being more active than urban residents, due to a larger proportion working in labour-intensive occupations such as agriculture, forestry and fishing, the same study found that only 43 per cent of men and eight per cent of women engaged in occupation-related physical activity. Indigenous Australians, 70 per cent of whom live in rural and remote areas, were 1.6 times more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be sedentary.



PHOTO: ARTHUR MOSTFAD

¹ Preparation of this Fact Sheet was led by Colleen Koh.

Barriers to physical activity among rural residents

Research studies conducted in rural Australia have identified various barriers and challenges faced by rural residents in undertaking physical activity. They include lack of time, confidence and motivation to engage in physical activity, as well as limited transport to sporting facilities and events. Certain sports facilities, such as heated swimming pools and commercial gymnasiums, are less readily available in rural than metropolitan areas. Other barriers are cultural. They include the belief that 'rural work' provides sufficient physical activity so that it is not necessary to pursue physical activity during leisure hours. Other barriers to physical activity are related to the lower socio-economic status of rural residents, making them less able to afford sporting equipment and fees. Rural residents also have less access to healthcare professionals who can potentially provide support and encouragement for participation in physical activity.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face additional barriers to physical activity participation. Social and cultural barriers are related to the importance placed on relationships. For example, time spent exercising alone for personal health benefits reduces the time for the family and the community. This may be seen as shameful. In addition, there is a lack of culturally appropriate information and services such as those that focus on the Indigenous people's preference for a holistic health approach. Culturally meaningful forms of physical activity for Indigenous people, such as traditional games and dance, are also rarely included in school physical education programs.

Strategies and interventions to promote physical activity in rural Australia

Health promotion activities in rural communities need to address the specific barriers and challenges to physical activity faced by rural residents. More importantly, given that rural communities are heterogeneous in terms of size, culture and types of barriers faced, a recent rural study commissioned by Health Promotion Queensland strongly concluded that strategies and interventions need to take into consideration the local environment and circumstances, rather than using a one-size fits all approach.

Additionally, guidance can be obtained from existing physical activity interventions in rural communities that are working well. An example is the *Eat Well Be Active* program implemented in Colac, a town of about 11,000 residents in rural Victoria. The program was based on community capacity building principles and aimed to promote physical activity, healthy eating and healthy weight among children aged 4 to 12-years. The program was designed and implemented by the community, including schools, parents and local health, housing and government services. It included activities to promote physical activity such as after-school physical



activities, walking to school programs, provision of sports equipment and the training of local sports coaches.

An example of a promising healthy lifestyle intervention in the Indigenous community is *Aunty Jean's Good Health Team Program* which was implemented in towns in southern New South Wales. This program also used a community capacity building approach and was tailored to meet the needs identified by the community, with local Elders providing leadership for the program. It was targeted at Indigenous people with chronic health conditions and aimed to promote physical activity, healthy eating and healthy weight. The program had a strong emphasis on culturally appropriate information-sharing, activities and self-management strategies and the creation of a supportive environment. Program activities to promote physical activity were conducted once a week in the Aboriginal community centre and included warm-up activities, line dancing and circuit training.

Tips for meeting the physical activity recommendations (ACSM 2007)

Do it in short bouts

You can accumulate your 30 minutes (or more) of activity throughout the day by combining a few shorter sessions of activity of 10 to 15 minutes each.

Set your schedule

Set aside specific days and times for exercise, making it a regular part of your schedule.

Make it a family affair

Take your partner, children, or a friend with you during exercise to add some fun to your routine.

Further Resources

The Department of Health and Ageing's *Building Healthy Communities - A Guide for Community Projects*, provides examples from 29 projects implemented in small rural communities across Australia. See <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ruralhealth-pubs-BHC.htm>

The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet provides a list of existing programs targeted at increasing physical activity in rural communities. See <http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/health-risks/physical-activity/programs-and-projects>

Other resources to aid in the promotion of physical activity include:

<http://www.10000steps.org.au/>

<http://www.beactive.com.au/>

<http://www.healthyactive.gov.au/>

<http://www.kinectaustralia.org.au/>

<http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/>

<http://www.your30.qld.gov.au/>

<http://www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au/>

<http://www.ausport.gov.au/>