

The Voices of Women 55–70

Examining Physical Activity



Canadian Association for the
Advancement of Women and
Sport and Physical Activity

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Who are we?

We are mothers, we are grandmothers, we are executives, we are homemakers, we are retired, we work part-time, we are married, we are single, we are widows, we are caregivers, and often we are unseen in our society. Whether we have been active all of our lives, or want to begin an activity in our later years, we often do not see ourselves reflected in our youth-embracing culture.

This is such a diverse time in our lives. We may have all the freedom and flexibility in the world or we may be caring for an aged parent, a loved one who is dependent upon us, or our teenagers who were the babies we had late in life.

We are becoming invisible. You don't see our faces in advertisements, or see us on television, yet we come in all shapes and sizes, from many cultures and backgrounds. We are women from the ages of 55 to 70, and this is our story.

How do we feel about being active?

If we have been active all of our lives, we have found ways to build physical activity into our days and weeks. Despite competing and conflicting priorities or our stage of life, we have found solutions to most barriers, and we have made physical activity a priority.

But for those of us who are less active, we need help to overcome competing priorities, the restrictions that we have put on ourselves, and the restrictions that society has imposed upon us. We know that we need to be more physically active to stay healthier longer, so we need help to make physical activity both a higher priority and a part of our every day lives.

What holds us back?

When physical activity is not a priority in our lives, and it competes with many other responsibilities, the barriers can seem almost insurmountable.

Some of these barriers are our own internal feelings, the secrets that we let hold us back. Even at this age we still have the same issues that women face throughout their lives. We may have a poor body image. We have fears — the fear of falling, going out alone at night or failing. Our lack of skill holds us back and we don't have the self-confidence to learn new skills. Guilt at taking time away for ourselves for leaving an ailing loved one or even guilt because we are not active can prevent us from getting started. We may be intimidated by new equipment, unfamiliar activities and instructors half our age. A bad experience from years gone by remains firm in our mind, and keeps us from trying again. We have often put everyone else's needs ahead of our own, and we find it hard to put ourselves first. And we are in transition, with many different physical, emotional and life changes going on.

Some of the barriers that hold us back are external. Our weather — the snow, cold and early darkness of winter, the heat of summer, and heavy rains are constant challenges. Just getting somewhere can be problematic, from using public transportation (if available), to having access to a car, or facing life without the ability to drive any more. And the way our cities are built — the lack of sidewalks, poor street lighting, the design of public trails and facilities, or the distances in rural areas — are all things that prevent us from participating. Cost can also be a factor, with the expense of classes, gym memberships, workout clothing and equipment keeping us from investing in ourselves.

Sometimes we simply don't understand how to get started even with the wide amount of information available. Our health is an ever-present factor as we go through various physical changes at this time of life, with nagging or chronic conditions. The reality of our lives continues to include care giving, with our dependents ranging from our own teenagers to grandchildren, aging parents or ailing partners. We may feel isolated, because we have retired, moved, or lost a spouse or partner, making it difficult to find new friends or make our way in a new area.

The programs we have tried do not have instructors who understand us, or who even look like us. They don't always know how to adapt the programs to safely suit our needs, or realize that we need to be welcomed and be made to feel comfortable, or to help us with the basic movements. We also need our families and friends to encourage us, to see people who look like us being active, and hear their testimonies.

How can you help us?

Getting more women in our age group of 55 to 70 physically active in a community is not the responsibility of any one group, but the collective responsibility of a wide variety of partners. You can all help us by working together to explore creative solutions to develop and adapt new or existing tools and resources specifically for us.

Women only programs work!

- Make us feel more comfortable
- Use our pictures in your advertising
- Explain clearly what to expect and what to wear
- Offer us introductory classes and training sessions
- Incorporate dance into your programs
- Use activities from our culture

Understand us!

- Educate instructors about arthritis, heart conditions and osteoporosis
- Provide alternate options to prevent injuries
- Help us adapt for our conditions and skill levels
- Tell us stories of women who have been injured and healed
- Recruit instructors in our age group

Teach us!

- Ways to build activity into our day
- The basics of an activity
- How to involve and engage our families and friends
- Realistic goals, objectives and outcomes
- The connection between food, nutrition and activity

Encourage us!

- Build a supportive community within the activity
- Create welcoming environments
- Introduce us to one another
- Hold 'bring a friend' classes
- Help us find buddies to talk and walk with
- Make it a social opportunity

Consider us!

- Plan/retrofit communities so that they facilitate safe walking/cycling
- Clear sidewalks of snow and ice
- Light doors and walkways
- Build ramps to buildings and trails
- Establish bus routes and car pools to get us places
- Construct bathrooms in convenient locations
- Keep costs reasonable
- Provide care giving alternatives
- Use the facilities near us, church halls and shopping malls

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About the Project

This information has been summarized from 38 focus groups of active women, less-active women and community stakeholders from across the country. Data collection (including an environmental scan) was conducted as the first stage of this three-year project undertaken by CAAWS to understand barriers and potential solutions related to women 55–70 and physical activity. Years two and three of the project focus on: developing resources for multi-sectoral practitioners and women 55–70 that will assist in: increasing physical activity levels; increasing awareness through advocacy around the importance of physical activity for women 55–70; disseminating the results of the project through community workshops; and evaluating the current and future impacts of the project in increasing physical activity opportunities for women 55–70.

Partners involved on the Advisory Committee to the project include: Canadian Nurses Association, Canadian Institute of Musculoskeletal Health and Arthritis, Active Living Coalition for Older Adults, Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, Victorian Order of Nurses Canada, Osteoporosis Canada and two members of the target audience, one representing less active women and the other representing active women. Funding for this project is provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada, through the Population Health Fund.

To download the complete Focus Group Report and Environmental Scan please go to the following website: <http://www.caaws.ca/women55plus/>. For more information on the Project please contact Shelley Callaghan at: purpledog@sympatico.ca



About CAAWS



The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) encourages girls and women to participate and lead in sport and physical activity. A not-for-profit organization, CAAWS offers a number of services, programs and resources to a variety of clients, including sport and physical activity organizations, teachers, coaches, health professionals and recreation leaders. CAAWS works in close co-operation with government and non-government organizations on activities and initiatives that advocate for positive change for young girls and women in the sport and physical activity communities.

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