



Understanding participation in sport: What determines sports participation among recently retired people?

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Participation in sport declines with age, and by 2020 almost half of the UK population will be over 50 years old.

As part of a wider programme of research into understanding participation, Sport England has completed some research among recently retired people to better understand reasons for levels of participation.

The research, undertaken by Arkenford Ltd, involved twenty-one focus groups among those who had recently retired.

Respondents were classified as 'active' or 'inactive' based on their answers to questions on how they spent their spare time.

"If you're thinking about exercise as meaning doing a triathlon, I'm certainly not. I'm thinking about being able to do DIY, decorating, cutting the grass and doing the garden."

"If I go too far my calf muscles will ache, I won't be able to do anything – I will be in bed."

"When you reach a certain age, people tend to disregard you."

"The biggest obstacle is that we can't even stretch our arms and legs, we are so old now. Everything creaks now anyway so we are not capable of anything else."

"When you say sport I am thinking of netball and tennis and running and we can't do that."

"A keep fit class...in a gentle, nice way...a social thing. Gentle exercise, not aerobics or anything serious."

What does being retired mean to retirees?

- Retirement represents a very radical change which means reduced stress, more freedom and a desire to keep busy.
- There is recognition of the 'ageist' society – they are identified as pensioners, but are seen as a spare set of hands to help by family.
- The body slows down so health is a key consideration.

How do the retired feel about exercise?

- It was felt that any form of physical activity with some exertion counts as exercise. Consequently, many who were classed as 'inactive' think they regularly take exercise.
- Most were aware of the benefits of exercise.
- The word 'sport' is not received well, as it implies strenuous or serious exercise.
- Only certain forms of exercise are deemed to be suitable – the more gentle forms of exercise such as walking, swimming, bowling, yoga.

What activity do retired people do?

- Most of the 'inactive' males did sport when younger but nowadays there is a greater emphasis on general exercise (gardening, walking, DIY), rather than 'sport'.
- Although classified as 'inactive', the inactive women did do some exercise informally, and others did activities which they saw as exercise (gardening, walking).
- Both males and females place more value on 'active chores' than exercise.

Are there any barriers to exercise, which are unique to certain groups?

- Ethnic minorities identified additional obstacles, such as: cultural behaviour norms appropriate to women; sportswear is considered immodest; most forms of exercise are unsuitable; they are not able to use mixed sex facilities; instructors need to be of the same gender and speak their language.

How can we encourage participation among retired people?

- This research has reported some clear recommendations:

Address the barriers

- Avoid using the word 'sport'.
- There are exercises suitable for these age groups.
- Provide reassurance over safety to overcome fears of injury and the need for recovery time from exercise.
- In promotion and instruction use older people who are in touch with the needs and restrictions of this age group.

Present relevant hooks

- Position physical activity as fun, highlighting social aspects (which they miss about not working).
- Tell them that exercise is different, and better than being generally active.

Provide opportunities that are easy for them

- Introduce 'taster' sessions for activities.
- Make opportunities as local as possible and organised just for their age group.

Make it a possibility for ethnic minority women

- Use their community halls and centres.
- Make opportunities single sex, with the assurance of privacy and not in sight of men.
- Use instructors who speak their language.
- Promote exercise that can be done in modest clothes.

Want to find out more?

You can find the full report and the research summary on the Sport England website (www.sportengland.org) or contact the Sport England research team at research@sportengland.org.

Other Sport England research

Understanding Participation in Sport, A Systematic Review (September 2005).

Participation in Sport in England: Sports Equity Index 2002.

"Now is my time to enjoy life ... I have worked hard enough for it."

"I don't want to go to the gym where all those 30 year olds are like Adonis."

"You can't do the garden without getting exercise. I do my hard work in the garden."

"Socialising is a good by-product of taking exercise."

