

Popular physical activities

What do Canadians do to be active? The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute probed this subject when it conducted the 1995 Physical Activity Monitor. More than 2500 Canadians answered, indicating which activities they had participated in during the year leading up to the spring telephone survey.

Annual participation rates

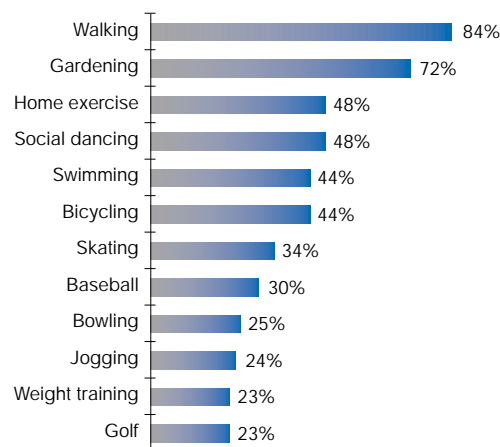
Figure 1 lists the top 12 activities, all of which have annual participation rates over 20%. In addition, more than one in ten Canadians reported participating in alpine skiing, volleyball, aerobics or exercise classes, cross-country skiing, tennis, hockey, soccer, or badminton. Football, other forms of dancing such as modern dance, racquetball, yoga, and squash were cited by about 5% of Canadians.

Survey participants were also given an opportunity to volunteer activities other than those appearing on a set list. The most commonly volunteered activities include hiking, basketball, fishing, canoeing or rowing, curling, roller blading, and martial arts, all reported by at least 2% of Canadians. Rates of participation in these activities may be underestimated by as much as a factor of three, since they were not prompted.¹

The relative ranking of activities corresponds to that of other surveys, in particular the National Population Health Survey that was completed about six months earlier.¹

Figure 1

TOP 12 ACTIVITIES AMONG CANADIANS



1995 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

Changes since 1981

Participation continues to be characterized by unstructured, low-cost activities that can often be done outside facilities. Increases seem to have occurred in moderate-intensity activities, such as bicycling, home exercise, and skating, as well as low-intensity activities such as walking, gardening, and bowling. Vigorous activities such as jogging tend to have remained the same.

Walking headed the list in the 1981 Canada Fitness Survey and the 1988 Campbell Survey on Well-Being in Canada, and it still heads it today. With the exception of jogging, most activities have enjoyed substantial gains among Canadians since 1981. About equal



numbers of Canadians jogged in 1995 and 1981, reversing the decrease reported in 1988.

The large increase in gardening may be due to two factors, one being a true increase in participation, the other being increased media attention on gardening as a physical activity, which could have prompted more people to report gardening since 1981.

The increase in skating since 1988 has now propelled it into the ranks of home exercise, social dancing, swimming, and bicycling as a common option. Add to that the growth in social dancing, baseball, bowling, weight training, and golf, and the number of activities having annual participation rates of at least 20% has doubled from 6 to 12 since 1981.

Sex differences

Walking, gardening, home exercise, social dancing, swimming, and bicycling are the top-ranked activities regardless of sex.

Participation rates differ for men and women, however, with more women walking, doing home exercise, and taking aerobics/exercise classes and more men bicycling, participating in sports, weight training, and jogging.

Differences between men and women also show up in volunteered activities. As many men and women report hiking and curling, but men are more likely to volunteer basketball, fishing, and martial arts.

The sex differences are similar to those observed in 1981 and 1988, with the exception of social dancing. Now equally popular among men and women, social dancing used to be more popular among women in 1988. Participation rates have generally increased in most activities for both men and women throughout the 14-year period.

Age differences

In general, the participation rates decline by age group. Exceptions are walking and gar-

dening, which are less popular with 18–24 year olds, and golf, which maintains its popularity until retirement age.

Young adults Walking and social dancing are reported by three quarters of young adults aged 18–24. Almost two thirds participate in home exercise, bicycling, and gardening. About half swim, play baseball, weight train, skate, or jog. Over one quarter participate in bowling, volleyball, alpine skiing, aerobics, football, badminton, soccer, and tennis. Golf, hockey, cross-country skiing, racquetball, and basketball are also common, being cited by at least one in ten.

Since 1981, annual participation rates in the above activities remained constant or increased. The largest increases (greater than 30 percentage points) occurred for social dancing, gardening, weight training, volleyball, baseball, and bowling. Walking, home exercise, skating, and aerobics also enjoyed substantial increases.

Compared with other age groups, more Canadians in this age group tend to participate in vigorous activities and in team sports. Yet, although 61% are active regularly, only 13% are active enough for optimal growth and development.² Reaching the optimal level can be accomplished by getting this age group to do the activities they are already doing more frequently.

Adults Walking and gardening are the most commonly reported activities among adults aged 25 to 44. Bicycling, swimming, social dancing, and home exercise rank next highest, being reported by half of this age group, followed by skating and baseball. More than one quarter report weight training, bowling, jogging, and playing golf, and at least one in ten report volleyball, alpine skiing, aerobics, cross-country skiing, hockey, tennis, soccer, or badminton.

With the exception of jogging, cross-country skiing, and tennis, there have been substantial

gains in annual participation rates for all activities since 1981. The largest gains (over 20 percentage points) have been in gardening, social dancing, baseball, walking, weight training, and skating.

Middle-aged adults Walking and gardening are by far the most frequent activities of middle-aged adults. Other common choices are home exercise, social dancing, swimming, and bicycling, cited by one third. Golf, skating, baseball, cross-country skiing, bowling, jogging, and aerobics round out the list of activities engaged in by at least one in ten middle-aged Canadians.

There has been substantial growth in seven activities since 1981. Gardening, social dancing, and walking have grown by about 30 percentage points while home exercise, baseball, swimming, and bicycling have grown by at least 15 percentage points.

Older adults Walking is a key activity among seniors, reported by 85%, followed by gardening, with a participation rate of 68%. Two in five seniors exercise at home while one in five take part in swimming or social dancing. About one in ten golf, bicycle, bowl, or attend exercise classes.

Since 1981, gardening, home exercise, walking, and social dancing have gained the most participants among seniors.

Regular activities

So far, the discussion has focused on annual participation in physical activities. That is, survey participants who reported engaging in a given activity at least once in the year preceding the survey were considered in the participation rates.

Another way to look at physical activities is to determine which ones tend to be performed regularly. “Regular” is defined here as a mini-

imum of 100 occasions for year-round activities and as a minimum of 26 occasions for seasonal activities.

In the case of year-round activities, walking again tops the list, with more than half of participants reporting walking on at least 100 occasions throughout the year—roughly twice a week (Table 1). Only 5% of walkers walk infrequently or less than six times a year. Home exercise also tends to be a regular activity. At the opposite end of the spectrum, activities such as bowling, volleyball, and social dancing are done mainly on occasion.

Table 1

FREQUENCY OF YEAR-ROUND ACTIVITIES			
	% of participants who take part in activity		
	≥100 times/yr	6–99 times/yr	< 6 times/yr
Walking	63 %	32 %	5 %
Home exercise	48	44	8
Weight training	39	52	9
Exercise classes	24	52	24
Social dancing	6	54	40
Volleyball	-	53	47
Bowling	-	28	68

1995 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

For a seasonal activity pursued over three months, 26 occasions per year correspond to a frequency of twice a week. By this definition, gardening boasts the largest proportion of regular participants (Table 2).

Table 2

FREQUENCY OF SEASONAL ACTIVITIES			
	% of participants who take part in activity		
	≥26 times/yr	6–25 times/yr	< 6 times/yr
Gardening	56 %	29 %	15 %
Jogging	52	32	16
Bicycling	42	40	18
Swimming	32	41	27
Baseball	20	37	43
Golf	18	41	41
Skating	9	38	53

1995 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

Joggers also tend to be faithful participants, followed by cyclists, some of whom use this activity as a mode of transportation. Participation in skating, baseball, and golf tends to be irregular, with the majority participating less than once a week over a three-month period.

Conclusion

Walking—Canada's number one activity—is often recommended as an exercise for people wanting to become more active. The regular pattern shown here for that activity shows that this is a promising approach.

Researchers have long recognized vigorous activity as a powerful health enhancer. More recently, they have also established the contribution of regular, moderate physical activity to health. The Canadian active living message thus values a continuum of activities, insisting on the importance of daily activity.

Canadians tend to adopt precisely the type of activities that integrate well into daily life. Walking and home exercise are unstructured, low-cost activities that can be done outside facilities and fit into most schedules. More seasonal activities like gardening, swimming, bicycling, and skating can also be pursued on modest budgets and at convenient times.

That one in five Canadians report regular participation in home exercise is encouraging as it shows that regular participation in activities that are under personal control is possible. Yet in view of the many unstructured activities pursued by Canadians, it may be a good idea to establish outreach services to help individuals and families in staying motivated and maintaining a regular pattern of activity.

Encouraging Canadians to do the activities they already engage in more often and more regularly is perhaps key to promoting healthy, active living as a way of life.

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References

- ¹ Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. (1996). 1995 Survey Methodology. *Progress in Prevention*.
- ² Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. (1996). Patterns of Physical Activity. *Progress in Prevention*, Bulletin no. 2.

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Popularity of physical recreation activities, age 18+

1995 Physical Activity Monitor

Rank, 1995	Activity	Percent of population ¹		
		1995	Women	Men
1	Walking	84%	89%*	78%
2	Gardening	72	71	74
3	Home exercise	48	53*	42
4	Social dancing	48	49	47
5	Swimming	44	43	46
6	Bicycling	44	41	48*
7	Skating	34	31	37
8	Baseball	30	23	38*
9	Bowling	25	26	24
10	Jogging	24	19	30*
11	Weight training	23	18	30*
12	Golf	23	15	31*
13	Alpine skiing	17	15	19
14	Volleyball	17	14	20*
15	Exercise class, aerobics	17	27*	6
16	Cross-country skiing	15	17	13
17	Tennis	13	9	17*
18	Hockey	12	3	21*
19	Soccer	12	7	17*
20	Badminton	12	11	12
21	Football	9	3	15*
22	Other dance (ballet, line, etc.)	6	7	4
23	Racquetball	5	3	7
24	Yoga	5	5	4
25	Squash	4	2	5
Volunteered activities				
26	Hiking	3	3	3
27	Basketball	3	—	5*
28	Fishing	3	—	5*
29	Canoeing/Rowing	2	—	—
30	Curling	2	2	2
31	In-line skating	2	—	—
32	Martial arts	2	—	3*
	Other water activities	3	2	4
	Other outdoor activities	3	—	5*
	Other winter activities	2	—	—
	Other games	2	—	—

¹ Percentage of Canadians who participated at least once in last 12 months.

* Significantly greater than other sex.

Trends in physical recreation activities, age 18+

1995 Physical Activity Monitor

Activity	Percent of population ¹								
	1995			1988 ²			1981 ³		
	Total	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	F	M
1. Walking	84%*	89%	78%	69%	76%	61%	59%	66%	52%
2. Gardening	72*	71	74	60	57	63	31	31	31
3. Home exercise	48*	53*	42	33	38	28	27	31	24
4. Social dancing	48*	49	47	35	40	30	13	15	11
5. Swimming	44*	43	46	40	41	38	32	33	31
6. Bicycling	44*	41	48	37	37	37	31	31	32
7. Skating	34*	31	37	19	17	21	16	16	17
8. Baseball	30*	23	38	13	8	19	6	3	9
9. Bowling	25*	26	24	17	17	17	8	9	7
10. Jogging	24	19	30	14	11	18	20	16	24
11. Weight training	23*	18	30	12	7	16	5	2	8
12. Golf	23*	15	31	20	12	29	13	6	20
13. Alpine skiing	17*	15	19	16	14	19	9	7	11
14. Volleyball	17*	14	20	3	3	3	3	3	3
15. Exercise class, aerobics	17*	27	6	13	20	5	7	10	4
16. Cross-country skiing	15	17	13	15	15	16	16	16	16
17. Tennis	13	9	17	11	8	14	12	10	14
18. Hockey	12*	3	21	7	1	14	7	1	13

¹ Percentage of Canadians who participated at least once in last 12 months.

² 1988 Campbell Survey on Well-Being in Canada.

³ 1981 Canada Fitness Survey.

* Significant increase since 1981.

Popularity of physical recreation activities, by age

1995 Physical Activity Monitor

18-24		25-44		45-64		65+	
Top activities	%	Top activities	%	Top activities	%	Top activities	%
1. Walking	77	1. Walking	85	1. Walking	87	1. Walking	85
2. Social dancing	74	2. Gardening	75	2. Gardening	77	2. Gardening	68
3. Home exercise	61	3. Bicycling	52	3. Home exercise	42	3. Home exercise	41
4. Bicycling	61	4. Swimming	50	4. Social dancing	42	4. Swimming	27
5. Gardening	61	5. Social dancing	50	5. Swimming	37	5. Social dancing	22
6. Swimming	53	6. Home exercise	49	6. Bicycling	36	6. Golf	15
7. Baseball	52	7. Skating	45	7. Golf	21	7. Bicycling	13
8. Weight training	51	8. Baseball	37	8. Skating	19	8. Bowling	13
9. Skating	47	9. Weight training	28	9. Baseball	17	9. Exercise class	9
10. Jogging	46	10. Bowling	28	10. X-country skiing	17		
11. Bowling	42	11. Jogging	27	11. Bowling	16		
12. Volleyball	41	12. Golf	25	12. Jogging	15		
13. Alpine skiing	33	13. Volleyball	20	13. Exercise class	11		
14. Exercise class	28	14. Alpine skiing	19	14. Alpine skiing	9		
15. Football	27	15. Exercise class	18	15. Weight training	9		
16. Badminton	27	16. X-country skiing	17	16. Tennis	8		
17. Soccer	27	17. Hockey	16	17. Other dance	6		
18. Tennis	26	18. Tennis	14	18. Yoga	6		
19. Golf	24	19. Soccer	13	19. Volleyball	6		
20. Hockey	20	20. Badminton	13	20. Badminton	5		

Popularity of physical recreation activities, by age

1988 Campbell Survey on Well-Being in Canada

18-24		25-44		45-64		65+	
Top activities	%	Top activities	%	Top activities	%	Top activities	%
1. Walking	63	1. Walking	69	1. Gardening	70	1. Walking	73
2. Bicycling	54	2. Gardening	63	2. Walking	69	2. Gardening	61
3. Swimming	54	3. Swimming	46	3. Social dancing	33	3. Home exercise	33
4. Social dancing	50	4. Bicycling	45	4. Swimming	32	4. Swimming	17
5. Home exercise	40	5. Social dancing	37	5. Home exercise	27	5. Social dancing	17
6. Gardening	34	6. Home exercise	34	6. Bicycling	26	6. Bicycling	13
7. Alpine skiing	31	7. Skating	27	7. Golf	20	7. Golf	10
8. Jogging	30	8. Golf	23	8. X-country skiing	14		
9. Skating	30	9. Alpine skiing	22	9. Bowling	11		
10. Baseball	29	10. Bowling	19	10. Skating	8		
11. Weight training	29	11. X-country skiing	19	11. Alpine skiing	7		
12. Bowling	28	12. Exercise class	17	12. Jogging	7		
13. Tennis	22	13. Jogging	17	13. Exercise class	6		
14. Golf	21	14. Baseball	17	14. Tennis	5		
15. Exercise class	19	15. Tennis	14	15. Fishing	5		
16. Hockey	17	16. Weight training	13	16. Weight training	4		
17. X-country skiing	17	17. Hockey	10	17. Baseball	4		
18. Volleyball	7	18. Fishing	6				
		19. Volleyball	3				

Popularity of physical recreation activities, by age

1981 Canada Fitness Survey

18-24		25-44		45-64		65+	
Top activities	%	Top activities	%	Top activities	%	Top activities	%
1. Walking	57	1. Walking	59	1. Walking	58	1. Walking	63
2. Bicycling	47	2. Swimming	39	2. Gardening	38	2. Gardening	32
3. Swimming	46	3. Bicycling	38	3. Swimming	22	3. Home exercise	16
4. Jogging	44	4. Gardening	33	4. Bicycling	21	4. Swimming	10
5. Home exercise	40	5. Home exercise	31	5. Home exercise	20	5. Bicycling	8
6. Skating	28	6. Jogging	24	6. X-country skiing	14	6. Golf	7
7. Tennis	28	7. Skating	23	7. Golf	13	7. Bowling	6
8. Alpine skiing	22	8. X-country skiing	20	8. Social dancing	9	8. Fishing	4
9. Social dancing	21	9. Social dancing	16	9. Jogging	7	9. Social dancing	2
10. X-country skiing	19	10. Golf	15	10. Bowling	7	10. Exercise class	2
11. Gardening	17	11. Tennis	14	11. Fishing	7	11. X-country skiing	2
12. Baseball	16	12. Alpine skiing	10	12. Skating	6		
13. Hockey	16	13. Exercise class	9	13. Exercise class	4		
14. Golf	15	14. Hockey	9	14. Tennis	4		
15. Weight training	12	15. Bowling	9	15. Alpine skiing	3		
16. Bowling	11	16. Baseball	7	16. Weight training	1		
17. Exercise class	10	17. Fishing	7	17. Hockey	1		
18. Volleyball	6	18. Weight training	5	18. Baseball	1		
19. Fishing	6	19. Volleyball	4				