



Insufficient physical activity

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AIHW

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[Part of: Australia's health 2020 \(/reports-data/australias-health\)](#)

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Physical activity is any body movement produced by skeletal muscles that uses energy (WHO 2018). Low levels of physical activity are a major risk factor for chronic conditions. People who are not active enough have a greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and dementia. Being physically active improves the immune system and mental and musculoskeletal health, and reduces other risk factors such as overweight and obesity, high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol. Physical activity can also improve symptoms and/or delay or halt the progression of a number of conditions or the onset of associated diseases and complications (Pedersen & Saltin 2015).

Being physically active is important across all ages and contributes to healthy growth and development in children and adolescents (WHO 2018). [Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines and the Australian 24-hour Movement Guidelines](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines) (<https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines>) are evidence-based recommendations that outline the minimum amount of physical activity required for health benefits (Department of Health 2019). The Guidelines recognise that different amounts and types of physical activity are required across the life span for optimal health.

This page focuses on the physical activity component of the Guidelines measurable through national health surveys.

Physical activity guidelines for adults

Physical activity can include:

- going for a walk, jog or bike ride
- playing a sport, like tennis, soccer or basketball
- going swimming, or taking a class at the gym.

Adults aged 18–64 should be active on most (preferably all) days, accumulating at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity physical activity each week (or an equivalent combination of both).

People aged 65 and over should accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, preferably all days (Department of Health 2019).

See [Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines for Adults \(18–64 years\)](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#npa1864).

(<https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#npa1864>) and [Physical Activity Recommendations for Older Australians \(65 years and older\)](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#npa%2065).

(<https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#npa%2065>)

Information on physical activity for adults is based on self-reported data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017–18 National Health Survey. The survey relies on people accurately remembering their physical activity levels, which can introduce recall bias and lead to over- or underestimations of the amount of physical activity completed.

Insufficient physical activity is captured here as:

- for adults aged 18–64: not completing 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity (where time spent on vigorous activity is multiplied by 2) across 5 or more days a week
- for adults aged 65 and over: not completing 30 minutes or more of physical activity on at least 5 days each week.

How common is insufficient physical activity?

Adults

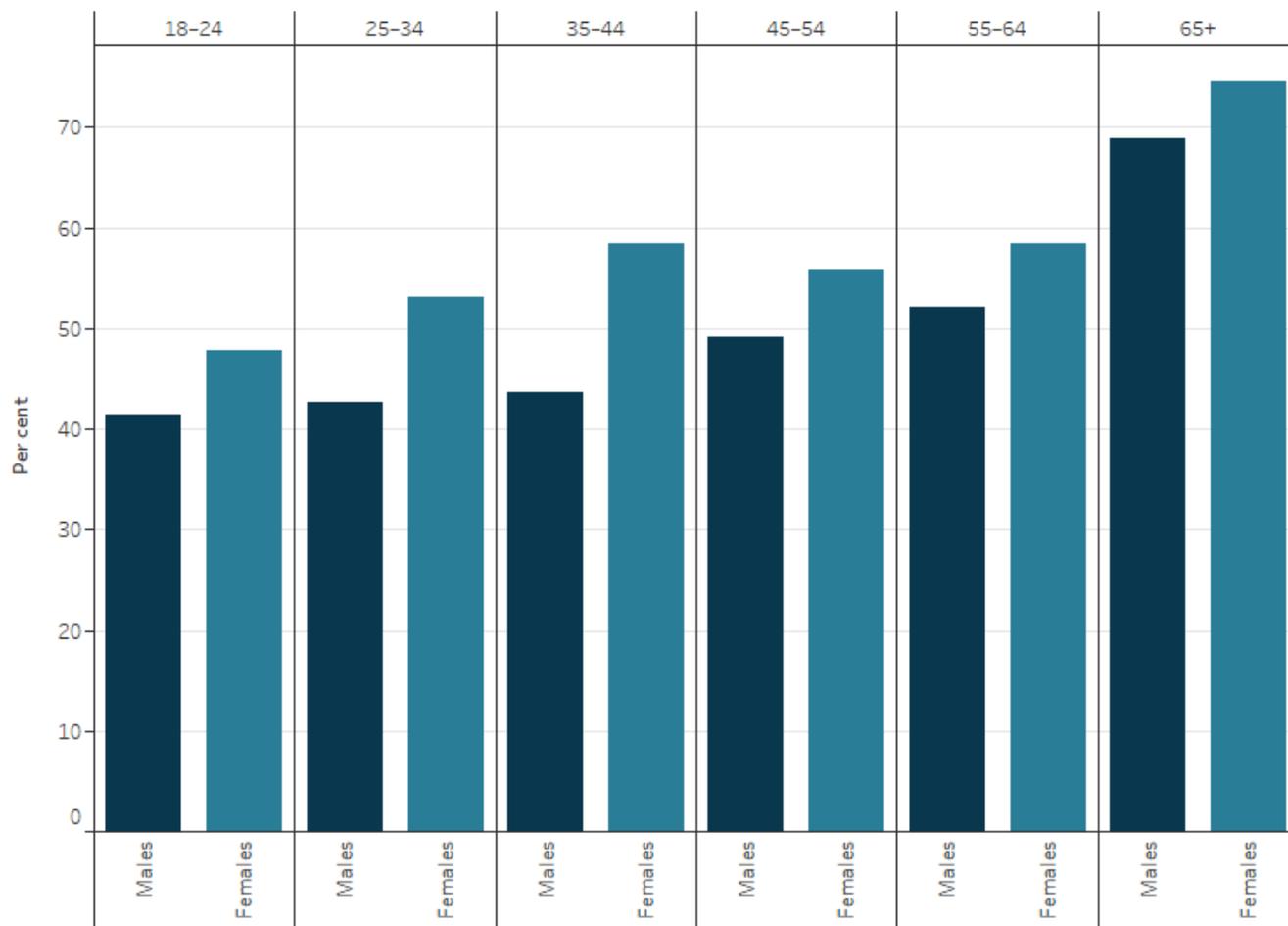
Based on self-reported data from the 2017–18 National Health Survey, more than half of adults (55%) didn't participate in sufficient physical activity (AIHW 2019b). Women were more likely than men to be insufficiently active (59% compared with 50%).

The rate of insufficient physical activity generally increases with age—less than half of those aged 18–24 were insufficiently active (41% of men and 48% of women) compared with more than two-thirds of those aged 65 and over (69% of men and 75% of women) (Figure 1).

This figure shows that the prevalence of insufficient physical activity increases with age for both males and females. Among those aged 18–24, 41% of men and 48% of women were insufficiently active, while for those aged 65 and over 69% of men and 75% of women were insufficiently active.

Figure 1: Prevalence of insufficient physical activity among adults, by age and sex, 2017–18

Females
 Males
 Persons



Note: Physical Activity includes physical activity at work, walking for fitness, recreation, or sport; walking to get to or from places; moderate exercise; and vigorous exercise (multiplied by 2) in the week prior to interview. Data does not include people for whom this measure was not known or not applicable.

Source: AIHW 2019a.

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

[Figure 1 data table \(129KB XLSX\)](#)

Trends

There was a slight decrease in the percentage of adults who were insufficiently active between 2007–08 and 2017–18, after adjusting for age—from 69% to 65% (AIHW 2019b). However, rates did not change significantly between 2014–15 and 2017–18. These data exclude workplace physical activity as information on this was collected in 2017–18 only.

Children and young people

Physical activity guidelines for children and young people

Physical activity for children includes:

- energetic play (such as climbing, running, jumping and dancing)
- going for a swim, walk, jog or bike ride
- playing a sport like tennis, soccer or basketball

Children aged 2–5 (who have not yet started full-time schooling) should spend at least 180 minutes a day on a variety of physical activities, including energetic play, with no more than 60 minutes of screen time per day.

Children and young people aged 5–17 should accumulate at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day, and no more than 120 minutes of recreational screen time per day (Department of Health 2019).

See [Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years \(Birth to 5 years\)](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#npa05).

(<https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#npa05>) and [Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Young People \(5–17 years\)](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#npa517).

(<https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#npa517>).

The most recent data available on physical activity and sedentary screen time for children and young people aged 2 and over is from the ABS 2011–12 National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey. However, under the Intergenerational Health and Mental Health Study, the ABS National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey is scheduled to be conducted again in 2023.

In 2011–12, 83% of children aged 2–5, 88% of children aged 5–12, and 98% of young people aged 13–17 had not met the physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines on all 7 days in the previous week (AIHW 2018).

See [Physical activity across the life stages](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/physical-activity/physical-activity-across-the-life-stages/contents) (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/physical-activity/physical-activity-across-the-life-stages/contents>) for more information on the physical activity and sedentary behaviour of Australian children and young people.

Health impact

In 2015, 2.5% of the disease burden in Australia could have been avoided if all people in Australia were sufficiently active (as defined in the Australian Burden of Disease Study) (AIHW 2019a).

The burden due to insufficient physical activity for associated diseases was:

- 19% for type 2 diabetes
- 17% for bowel cancer
- 16% for uterine cancer
- 14% for dementia
- 12% for coronary heart disease
- 11% for breast cancer
- 10% for stroke.

See [Burden of disease](#).

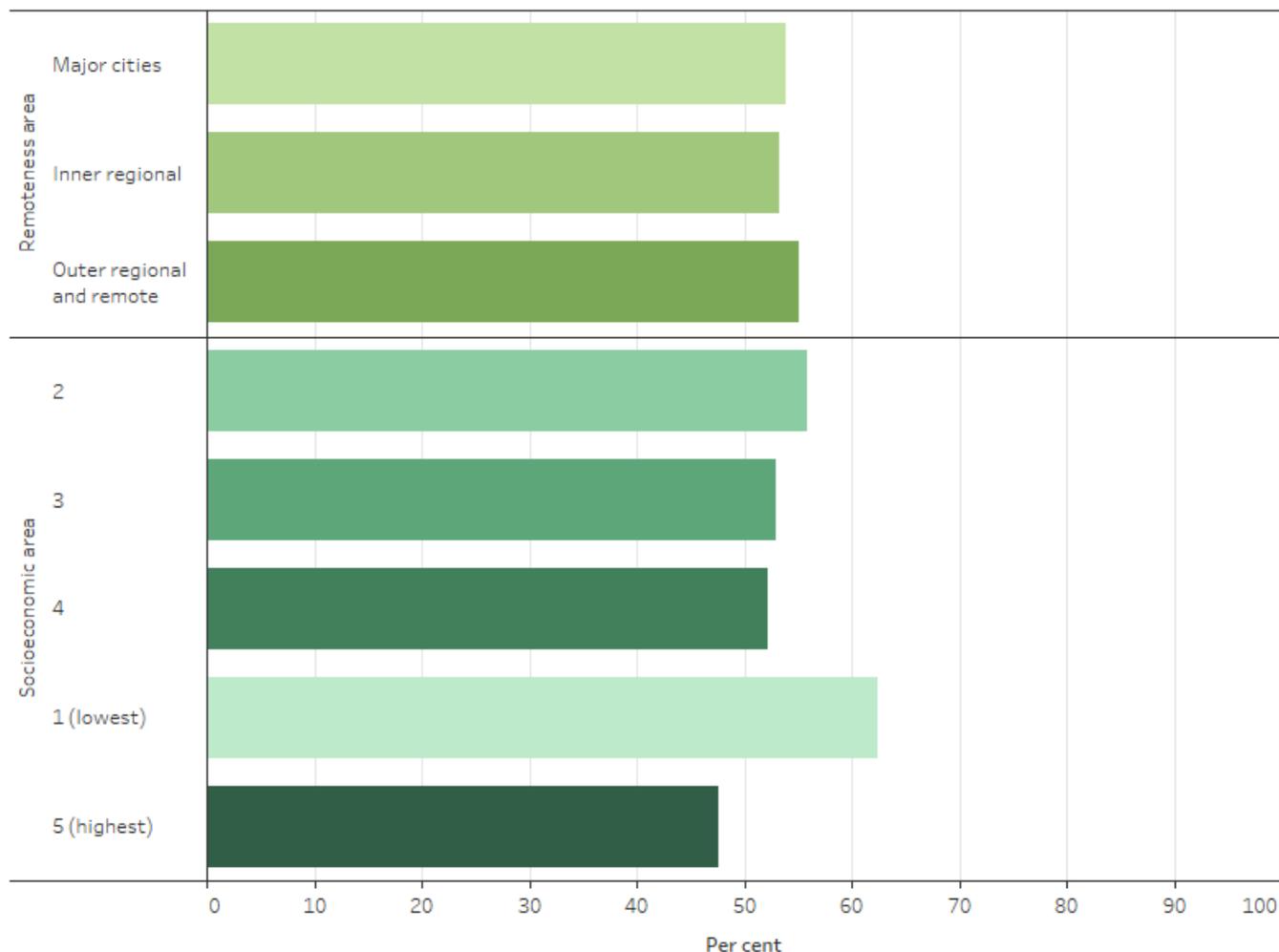
Variation between population groups

See [Health risk factors among Indigenous Australians](#) for information on insufficient physical activity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

There were no significant differences in the prevalence of insufficient physical activity between remoteness areas for adults in 2017–18, after adjusting for age (AIHW 2019b). However, there were differences between socioeconomic areas—63% of adults in the lowest socioeconomic areas were insufficiently active compared with 48% in the highest, after adjusting for age (Figure 2). See [Rural and remote health](#) and [Health across socioeconomic groups](#).

This graph shows that the prevalence of physical activity was similar across remoteness areas—*Major cities* (54%), *Inner regional* (53%), and *Outer regional and remote* (55%). It also shows the prevalence of insufficient physical activity increased as disadvantage increased—from 48% for quintile 5 (highest socioeconomic areas) to 63% for quintile 1 (the lowest socioeconomic areas).

Figure 2: Prevalence of insufficient physical activity among adults, by selected population characteristics, 2017–18



Notes:

1. Physical Activity includes physical activity at work, walking for fitness, recreation, or sport; walking to get to or from places; moderate exercise; and vigorous exercise in the week prior to interview. Data does not include people for whom this measure was not known or not applicable.

2. Rates are age-standardised to the 2001 Australian standard population.

Source: AIHW 2019a.

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

[Figure 2 data table \(129KB XLSX\)](#)

Where do I go for more information?

For more information on insufficient physical activity, see:

- [Insufficient physical activity](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/risk-factors/insufficient-physical-activity/contents/physical-inactivity) (https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/risk-factors/insufficient-physical-activity/contents/physical-inactivity)
- [Physical activity across the life stages](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/physical-activity/physical-activity-across-the-life-stages/contents/table-of-contents) (https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/physical-activity/physical-activity-across-the-life-stages/contents/table-of-contents)
- [Australian Burden of Disease Study 2015: Interactive data on risk factor burden](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/interactive-data-risk-factor-burden/contents/overview) (https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/interactive-data-risk-factor-burden/contents/overview)
- [Physical activity during pregnancy 2011–12](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mothers-babies/physical-activity-during-pregnancy-2011-12/contents/table-of-contents) (https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mothers-babies/physical-activity-during-pregnancy-2011-12/contents/table-of-contents)

Visit [Physical activity](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/behaviours-risk-factors/physical-activity/overview) (https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/behaviours-risk-factors/physical-activity/overview) for more on this topic.

References

AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2018. [Physical activity across the life stages](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/physical-activity/physical-activity-across-the-life-stages/contents/table-of-contents) (https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/physical-activity/physical-activity-across-the-life-stages/contents/table-of-contents). Cat. no. PHE 225. Canberra: AIHW.

AIHW 2019a. [Australian Burden of Disease Study: impact and causes of illness and death in Australia 2015](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/burden-disease-study-illness-death-2015/contents/table-of-contents) (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/burden-disease-study-illness-death-2015/contents/table-of-contents>). Australian Burden of Disease series no. 19. Cat. no. BOD 22. Canberra: AIHW.

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