

# Older adult participation in online exercise classes during the pandemic: A follow up study



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In the summer of 2021, older Manitobans (65 years and older) were surveyed about their experiences using online exercise throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited through various community organizations (e.g., exercise organizations, senior centres, retiree organizations). This study is a follow up study to a survey conducted in the summer of 2020, investigating the experiences of older adults in Manitoba using online exercise at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In total, nearly 600 people (71% female) completed the online survey, which consisted of 52 questions. Participants were primarily in their late 60s (45.3%), 70s (44.3%), 80s (8.6%), with 4 participants who were 90 years and older. Most of the participants reported living in the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (85.3%), with lower percentages from the Interlake-Eastern (9.3%) and Southern (3%) Health Authorities . An additional 4 participants reported living in the Prairie Mountain Regional Health Authority, and 2 participants in the Northern Regional Health Authority.



45.8% participated in physical activity not associated with an exercise class  $\geq$  4x/week

Participants were asked about their activity levels outside of exercise classes prior to the pandemic, and this revealed that those who took part in this survey were relatively active for this age group, with nearly half (45.8%) reporting participating in physical activity not associated with an exercise class 4 or more times per week prior to the pandemic. An additional 21.9% reported 3 times per week, and 16% reported 2 times per week. These numbers remained similar when asked about the frequency of physical activity outside of exercise classes over the course of the pandemic, with almost half (43.2%) again reporting 4 or more times a week, followed by 22% selecting 3 times per week, and 16.5% reporting 2 times per week.

When asked if they had participated in any online exercise classes prior to the pandemic, only 15% of participants reported having ever taken part in an online exercise class. However, when asked if they had participated in any online exercise classes in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, 248 (43.8%) reported that they had. This was an increase of 28.8%, compared to prior to the pandemic. Despite this increase, 52.5% of participants reported their overall levels of physical activity had decreased during the pandemic, 31.7% reported it had stayed the same, and 15.8% reported an increase in physical activity levels.

## Participants who did not take part in online exercise classes



34.7%

preferred to exercise in person with others

Of the 318 (56.2%) participants who had not participated in any online exercise classes during the pandemic, when asked to select all reasons why they had not, the most common responses were 'I prefer to exercise in-person with others' (34.7%), 'I am not motivated to do so' (31.8%), 'I have a routine I do on my own' (31.5%), 'I prefer to have an instructor directly present with me when I exercise' (16.2%), 'I do not enjoy participating in group classes, and prefer exercising individually' (13.3%), and 'I have difficulty using internet-based technologies' (9.1%). These individuals also gave many circumstances under which they would consider participating in online exercise classes in the future. The most prevalent response was 'If I had no other options' (43.1%), followed by 'If an online class was more suited to my individual needs' (28.6%).



10.6%

attended fitness facilities (when open)  $\geq 4x/week$

When asked what the likelihood of them participating in online or virtual exercise classes either regularly or occasionally after the pandemic, 29.9% selected very unlikely, 33.1% selected unlikely, 28.9% selected not sure, 6.5% selected likely, and 1.6% selected very likely. Despite not participating in online exercise classes, when fitness facilities were open periodically over the course of the pandemic, over half (61.9%) of participants did not attend these facilities, with the majority reporting concerns for safety around COVID-19 as the reason. In contrast, 10.6% attended these facilities 4 or more times per week, 10.3% 3 times per week, 11.6% 2 times per week, 3% once per week, and 2.7% less than once per week.

## Participants who took part in online exercise classes

For the 248 participants who reported that they participated in online exercise classes during the pandemic, around three quarters of these participants did so over the span of Winter 2021 (76%) and Fall 2020 (73.5%), with slightly less reporting to have participated in the Spring of 2021 (68.8%). Smaller proportions reported participating in the spring of 2020 (65.4%), summer of 2021 (53.9%), and the summer of 2020 (45.3%). When asked how often, on average they participated in online exercise classes per week over the past six months, 19.3% participated 4 or more times per week, 22.4% 3 times per week, 24.2% 2 times per week, 10.3% once per week, and 23.8% less than once per week.

Over half of these respondents stated that the online exercise class was pre-recorded (56.7%), slightly less than half (46.8%) reported it was a live class where the instructor could see what participants were doing, and a minority of participants (23.6%) reported that it was a live class where the instructor was exercising at the same time but could not see the participants or provide feedback. The most common platform these online exercise classes were offered on was Zoom (38.5%), followed by YouTube (29.5%), and then a website link with embedded videos (8.1%). The vast majority participated in online exercise classes from their local community (68.3%), with fewer participating in classes in other parts of Manitoba (16.3%), other parts of Canada (13.6%), or in other countries (28.5%).



57.3%

selected online classes based on content they were interested in

When asked how they chose what online exercise classes to participate in, over half (57.3%) selected based on ‘the class content interested me’, slightly less than half (42.7%) because they knew the instructor, and around a third (33.2%) because ‘the course was offered at a time that fit my schedule’. Other reasons were the course being offered by a credible source (26.3%) and the cost of the class (25%). When asked if the cost factored in their choice to participate or not, 66% of participants responded that it did, and less than half (45.3%) had ever paid to participate in an online exercise class. Over half of the participants (53.3%) heard about the exercise classes that they participated in through an ‘email from program or instructor that I already knew’, 27.1% from ‘searching the internet’, 22.7% from ‘suggestions from friends or family’, and 13.1% from ‘suggestions from community lists of services available during the pandemic’.



63.5%

participated in general classes

The most common kind of class participated in was a ‘General class that incorporated aerobic, strength, balance, and flexibility’ (63.5%), followed by yoga (37.3%), strength training only (19.7%), aerobic training only (14.2%) and Pilates (14.2%). The vast majority (85.5%) reported that the level of intensity of the classes were ‘just right in terms of intensity’, while 9.3% reported it was ‘not intense enough’, and 5.3% that it was ‘too intense’. An even greater majority (90.8%) stated that the variety offered by the online exercise classes was ‘just the right amount of variety’, with only 3 participants reporting it had too much variety. In addition to the general satisfaction with the variety being offered, when asked if the instructors provided options for doing the exercises that would allow people with a variety of ability levels to participate, 89.5% reported that the instructors did. Many of the classes required equipment (77.8%), but most people (87.6%) already had this equipment.



69.8%

reported they would participate in online classes outside of a pandemic

Over two-thirds (69.8%) of participants reported that they would participate in online exercise classes outside of a time of a pandemic, while less than a third (30.2%) stated that they would not continue with online exercise classes when exercise facilities open again. Reasons for why they would continue include: the convenience of being able to stay at home (76.4%); avoiding the cold weather or snowy roads in the winter (70.8%); not needing to drive to and from the facility (66.5%); the flexibility the online classes afforded them regarding their schedule (59.6%); the variety of classes offered (38.5%); and the addition of something new to their usual routine (35.4%). Reasons for not participating again included: enjoying the social aspect of in-person exercise classes (79.7%); online exercise classes aren't motivating enough (34.8%); not having the room and/or equipment to do online exercise classes (21.7%); preferring to do their own exercise routine (10.1%).



72%

missed not having others to talk to in online exercise classes

Similarly, what people did not like about participating in online exercise classes included: 'miss not having others to talk to before, during, or after the class' (72%), 'miss not seeing others exercising with me' (45.3%), 'not enough motivation' (31.3%), 'availability of exercise equipment' (29.4%); and 'not enough feedback from the instructor' (22.9%). However, there were also many aspects that they liked better about online exercise classes: 'safety around COVID-19' (70.1%); 'don't have to spend time getting to and from class' (64.5%); 'more flexibility in what time I participate in class' (50%); 'doesn't matter what I wear to class' (35.5%); 'don't have to arrange transportation to class' (31.8%); 'greater variety of classes offered' (18.7%); and 'like to exercise without others seeing me' (18.2%). Interestingly, despite the majority (72%) reporting they 'miss not having others to talk to before, during, or after the class', when asked if they would prefer that online exercise classes incorporated as social component, 69.3% reported that they would not prefer this.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study followed up on the online exercise survey conducted in summer 2020 and provided several interesting findings about those who participated in online exercise classes and those who did not. The perspectives of the study participants will be valuable for policymakers, programmers, and instructors. We thank all those who took the time to participate and shared their perspectives and experiences.



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