



# Older adult participation in online exercise classes during the pandemic

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October 2020

In the summer of 2020, older Manitobans (65 years and older) were surveyed about online exercise, during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited through various community organizations (e.g., exercise organizations, senior centres, retiree organizations).

In total, 675 people (57% female) completed the online survey, which consisted of 30 questions. Participants were primarily in their late 60s (39%), 70s (45%), 80s (14%), and 6 participants who were 90 years and older. Most of the participants reported living in the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (87%), with lower percentages from the Interlake-Eastern (10%), Southern (2%) and Prairie Mountain (1%) Health Authorities. No participants came from the Northern Health Region.

Participants taking part in this survey were relatively active for this age group, with almost half (46%) reported participating in physical activity not associated with an exercise class 4 or more times per week. In addition, 38% of participants reported participating in exercise classes 3 times per week or more.

More than half of the participants of the survey (63%) reported that they did not participate in online exercise classes during the pandemic. Common responses to 'why not?': I prefer to exercise with others in the same room (23%), and I prefer to have an instructor present with me when I exercise (22%). Far fewer reported that they did not because of lacking a device (3%), having unreliable internet (2%), or because they felt that online classes are 'unsafe' (1%). For those who had answered 'No' to online exercise classes, there were many circumstances where they might consider doing so in the future (e.g., if the weather were poor, if there was another lockdown, or if they could do it with other people).

For the 249 participants who reported that they did participate in online exercise classes, most (80%) reported that the classes they 'attended' were pre-recorded. Only 17% reported participating whereby the instructor could see what the participants were doing, and 20% reported that the class was live, but the instructor could not see what the participants were doing. The most common online platform was YouTube (57%) followed by website links (29%), Zoom (22%), Facebook (12%), and FaceTime (1%). Interestingly, the vast majority participated in classes from their local community (77%), with far fewer participating in classes in other parts of Manitoba (9%), other parts of Canada (7%), or in other countries (23%). Perhaps not surprisingly, participants reported that they primarily heard about the class through an email from the program (72%). They also received suggestions from family or friends (17%), searched the internet (18%), or got suggestions from community lists of services available during the pandemic (11%).

The types of classes included general exercise (61%), yoga (34%), strength training only (25%), aerobic only (21%), balance (16%), Pilates (7%), Tai Chi (2%), and stationary biking (2%). Participation frequency ranged from '< once per week' (26%), to 22% participating 4 or more times per week, with the most frequent being '2 times per week' (28%). The intensity of classes was reported as primarily being 'just right' (82%), with only 15% saying that it was 'not intense enough', and 2% saying the exercise was 'too intense'. Similar results were found for variety, with 89% saying it was 'just right', and almost no one saying there was too much variety (0.4%). In addition, 88% of respondents said that 'the instructor provide[d] options for doing the exercises that would allow people with a variety of ability levels to participate'. Many of the classes required equipment (69%), but most people (88%) already had this equipment.

Only a third (32%) of participants said that would not continue with online exercise classes when exercise facilities open up again, and 64% said they would participate in online exercise classes outside of a time of a pandemic. Reasons for why they would included: the convenience in terms of time (14%); it does not require travel and saves time (18%); and during the winter or inclement weather (12%). Reasons for why they would not included: the fact that they prefer the group setting and like to have other people around (30%); they prefer the gym (29%); and they prefer to exercise with an instructor (15%). Similarly, what people did not like about participating in online exercise classes included: 'missing not having others to talk to before, during or after the class' (64%); 'miss not seeing others exercising with me' (47%); and feeling unsafe when the instructor can't see me' (4%). However, there were also many things that they liked better about online exercise classes: 'don't have to spend time getting to and from class' (61%); 'doesn't matter what I wear to class' (32%); 'don't have to arrange transportation to class' (21%); and 'like to exercise without others seeing me' (12%).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed 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 share their perspectives and experiences.