

Group-based exercise programs for older adults in Manitoba

Summary report



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February 2020

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How to cite this document:

Lee, M. and Porter, M. (2020). *Group-based exercise programs for older adults in Manitoba Summary report*. Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Cover: Older adults getting ready to exercise; Depositphotos

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The study was conducted by Mikyung Lee, a master's student in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management at the University of Manitoba and Dr. Michelle Porter, a professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management and director of the Centre on Aging at the University of Manitoba.

Introduction

Group-based exercise programs have been shown to be one means of not only increasing activity levels for older adults but sustaining physical activity. However, research has shown that only a small proportion of older Manitobans participate in exercise classes. There are several factors that could affect attendance and adherence to group-based exercise programs amongst older adults which are 1) person-level factors including current/previous physical activity levels, educational attainment, health status, and personal motivators, 2) instructors' characteristics including personality, professionalism and previous experience, 3) program design including location, affordability and variety of exercise classes and 4) social interaction. In this study, we focused on factors that are related to exercise programs and instructors, which are instructors' characteristics, program design and social interaction in accordance with the purposes of our study.

Purpose of the study

The purposes of the study were to determine:

1. what group-based exercise programs exist in Manitoba for older adults (55 years and older)
2. where these programs are delivered
3. how these programs are designed,
4. who are the instructors of these programs and
5. what elements are included that may encourage older adults to attend and adhere to them.

Methods

This study was completed using an online survey of instructors who deliver group-based exercise programs to older adults in Manitoba. Survey links were sent to those individuals associated with the Manitoba Fitness Council, the Manitoba Association of Senior Centres, and Recreation Connections. One hundred twelve instructors who completely filled out the survey, and 158 programs were included in the data analysis.

Results

Instructors' characteristics

The majority of instructors were relatively older (≥ 50 years, 69.7%), female (86.6%), employed (85.4%), had exercise-related certifications (86.6%) and over 5 years of experience in delivering exercise programs (54.5%). With regard to types of certifications, instructors had Active Older Adult from Manitoba Fitness Council (44.6%), CSEP Certified Personal Trainer (14.3%), Steppin Up With Confidence from Active Aging in Manitoba (8%) and CSEP Certified Exercise Physiologist (6.3%). In addition, 47 instructors had other certifications including yoga, pilates, zumba, Tai chi, cycle, aqua fitness and group training certification.

Program description

The majority of programs required a fee for participation (77.8%). Most programs were mixed-gender programs (84.2%) and all of the single-gender programs were female-only programs. Most programs were 30 minutes to an hour in length (89.9%), were conducted 1-3 times a week (74.7%) and included a variety of types of training within the programs (e.g., balance, resistance, aerobic, etc.; 91.1%). The majority of the programs had more than one goal (85.4%). The most common goal was improving overall health (94.3%). Other goals included improving balance (77.2%), aerobic capacity (67.1%), strength (73.4%) and others (e.g., improving flexibility, mobility, memory, functional independence, cognitive ability; 35.4%)

In regards to the season that the programs were delivered, most programs were delivered in spring (94.9%), fall (95.6%) and winter (94.9%) whereas in summer, only 56.3% were available. Seventy-one programs (44.9%) had a participant rate difference between winter and non-winter months. Out of those programs, 23.9% had a lower participation rate in winter. The most prevalent reason for a lower participation rate in winter was 'participants go away to warm locations' (94.1%). Other reasons were 'participants avoid being out in cold weather' and 'participants avoid going out of doors to prevent falls on slippery surfaces' (52.9% for both)

followed by ‘difficulty in accessing the location where the program was offered because of a lack of transportation’ (23.5%).

Of those programs where postal codes were provided (n=139), more than half of the programs (66.9%) were performed in Winnipeg and there was no program reported in our survey in northern Manitoba (Northern Regional Health Authority). With respect to rural-urban disparity of group-based exercise programs, 86.3% of the programs were available in urban areas and there were only 19 programs (13.7%) in rural areas.

Social interaction

The majority of programs had opportunities for social interaction amongst exercise participants within the program (70.9%). In terms of post-exercise social interaction, the instructors of 115 programs (72.8%) thought that the participants socialized with each other outside of the program. If those two results were taken together, there were only 6 programs (3.8%) where the programs did not have opportunities for social interaction within the program, nor did instructors think the participants socialized with each other outside of the program. The most common way to socialize amongst exercise participants outside of the programs was going for a coffee (36.7%) followed by attending social activities (e.g., movies, shows, golf, birthday events, etc.; 24.1%).

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the small number of questions (26 questions) asked to ensure a high response rate and not all instructor groups were necessarily reached by the survey distribution method. In addition, since participation in the survey was voluntary, instructors were not required to provide responses, even if they did receive the survey invitation, which meant that some programs could have been missed.

Strengths and implication

However, the descriptive information collected in this study could be useful for future exercise program planning for older adults in the province of Manitoba. Factors that can be considered when designing group-based exercise programs could include those that are known to affect attendance and efficacy. These include aspects of the instructors, the programs themselves, whether the programs align with physical activity guidelines, and whether opportunities are provided for social interaction. In addition, regional disparities could also be further explored to ensure that there are opportunities for group-based exercise programs for older adults across all of Manitoba.

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