



Rural Route to Active Aging Focus Group Report: What We Heard in Rural Alberta

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Executive Summary

During the fall of 2006 and winter of 2007, the Alberta Centre for Active Living held meetings with older adults in six communities in rural Alberta. This report outlines the main results of those focus groups.

This section includes information about the:

- Main recommendations/conclusions from the focus groups.
- Role of local governments in creating supportive environments for physical activity.

Recommendations/Conclusions

Below, you will find the key results from the participants' responses.

- Participation in physical activity: Focus group participants participated in a variety of physical activities, including leisure time and work-time activities of light to moderate intensity. In addition, some participants talked about taking an “active living” approach to their day-to-day activities, e.g., by parking their cars away from their destination.
- Defining physical activity: Participants gave several examples when asked about the term “physical activity,” but not everyone clearly understood the meaning of the term. For example, some participants listed singing and motorcycle riding as physical activities.
- Most common activity: Walking was the most common physical activity. In addition, when asked about doing more physical activity, participants said that they would choose to do more walking.
- Motivation: Many participants saw receiving encouragement from others as important.

Although participants recognized the value of a physically active lifestyle (and reported physical, psychological and social benefits), many had not been regularly physically active pre-retirement. In fact, a participant's decision to adopt a more physically active lifestyle was often motivated by a physical health problem.



It may not be vital to focus on providing participants with information on the benefits of physical activity. However, the data suggest that many participants may be relative “newcomers” to physical activity. They may appreciate a resource that provides information on activities that are adaptable (e.g., activities for those with health problems).

- Sources of information: Participants were most likely to learn about physical activity opportunities through local papers, posters, flyers, newsletters, pamphlets, etc.
- Barriers to physical activity: Participants perceived a lack of opportunities for physical activity, especially related to the weather. Many participants expressed concern about being unable to be active outside once snow was on the ground because of a fear of slipping and falling.

In terms of resource development, participants may need information on indoor activity options (especially during the winter) as well as information on “safe” activity options (e.g., mall walking, benches near the outdoor track at the local school or ensuring that main trails are maintained year round for safe walking).

- Physical activity professionals: Participants preferred information to be delivered in person by physical activity professionals.
- Resources specific to older adults: Participants wanted resources to present information specific to older adults and to show physically active older adults from the local area.

A note of caution ... Given the way we recruited participants for this project and the nature of qualitative data collection, we caution against generalizing the results beyond rural Alberta.

Much of the information collected came from rural older adults who are physically active. More sedentary participants or people who live in other rural locations may have answered our questions differently. However, we feel that the focus group participants provided useful information that can be used for future health promotion initiatives.

The focus group results help us to:

- Learn more about the nature of physical activity participation of older adult participants.
- Improve the design of future physical activity resources for rural older adult Albertans.
- Create supportive environments for active aging in rural communities.

The Role of Local Governments

Another major issue was the state of the built environment in rural communities. So many older adults’ lives were and still are tied to the land. Mechanization of farming, retirement, winter weather, the distance between destinations and perceptions of active living all contribute to the sedentary lifestyle of many rural adults.

However, one of the biggest factors is the lack of safe and accessible space for physical activity in the community. Although not directly stated by many participants, local governments play an important role in creating communities that support physical activity among older adults.

Resources for rural communities should include material directed at older adults and also resources to help local governments work toward creating supportive environments for their older residents.

Project Background

This section includes information about:

- The Government of Alberta's priorities for older adults in rural areas.
- The purpose of our focus groups.

Government Focus on Older Adults in Rural Areas

The Government of Alberta has identified the need to focus more on older adults living in rural areas.

In addition, according to the World Health Organization (1997), sedentary living is the greatest health risk for older adults, a fact that emphasizes the importance of encouraging older adults to be physically active as they age.

The Government of Alberta's February 2005 report, *A Place to Grow: Alberta's Rural Development Strategy*, lists ways to support older adults through a series of priority actions, including working with communities to:

- Ensure that a range of services is available, so that seniors can remain in rural Alberta.
- Encourage seniors to play an active role in mentoring young people, maintaining their volunteer activities and continuing to be active participants in their communities.



Physical activity is an essential factor in addressing the priority actions listed above.

Rural seniors face more barriers than their urban counterparts to being physically active. There is also a lack of resources and information about physical activity suited to older adults living in rural communities.

More work needs to be done to support community practitioners and decision-makers in increasing the physical activity levels of older adults in their communities and in addressing the priorities and challenges identified by the Government of Alberta.

The ultimate goal is to improve the health of older rural Albertans through education, facilitating community action and promoting lifelong engagement in physical activity.

Purpose of the Focus Groups

The meetings were an opportunity to sit down with people in rural communities and have them tell us about:

- The current active living situation in their community.
- Their thoughts on physical activity.
- Their needs.
- The resources that would be useful to them.

The focus groups are the first step in developing new resources for:

- Physical activity promotion in rural communities.
- Building capacity for physical activity opportunities for adults (55 to 75) in rural areas.

Location of Focus Groups

Location	Number of Participants
Westlock	10
Thorhild	7
Wembley	10
Vegreville	18
Provost	9
Fort Vermillion	5

This section includes participants' responses to questions and includes information about:

1. Their understanding of physical activity.
2. Their physical activity levels.
3. What determines physical activity.
4. Content and design preferences for new resources.

1. Understanding of Physical Activity

"What does 'physical activity' mean to you?"

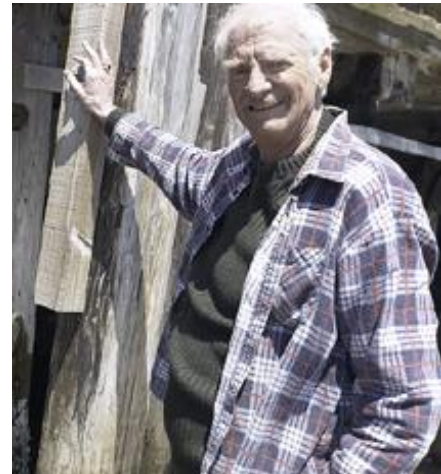
In response to this question, participants primarily provided examples of activities, including:

- Light-intensity activities such as gardening and yard work, stretching, bowling.
- More moderate to vigorous intensity activities such as golfing, "cardiovascular activities," shovelling, swimming, walking, running, climbing stairs, dancing, biking, resistance training, and cross country skiing.

Most responses referred to leisure-time physical activities, but participants also gave a few examples of work-time physical activities, including housecleaning, cutting wood and working cattle.

Although most participants simply provided examples of activities, one participant elaborated on her view of physical activity: *"anything that a person is not obligated to do. Like running, walking, golfing ... If you're doing it ... I look upon it as exercise. What I do around the house and around the yard could be exercise but I don't think it falls into the same class."*

This participant seemed to distinguish between exercise and physical activity, possibly using levels of structure or intensity to distinguish these two terms. Her response is consistent with the view that exercise tends to be more structured and planned than physical activity.



Participants cited many physical, psychological and social benefits of being physically active. Physical and sociological benefits were the most often cited.

“What benefits do you see to being physically active?”

Commonly cited *physical benefits* included:

- gives you energy
- maintains muscle strength
- improves appetite
- helps with weight loss
- improves circulation
- promotes physical independence
- lubricates joints
- strengthens the heart
- decreases cholesterol
- releases endorphins
- reduces stiffness
- improves sleep

Many participants cited the social benefits of physical activity. For example, they said being physically active enabled them to, “*get out and meet people*” and spend time with others outside their homes. Many participants emphasized the importance of the social aspect of physical activity.

Several participants cited *psychological benefits* of physical activity, including:

- improves mental outlook
- helps prevent Alzheimer’s
- relieves depression
- helps you be mentally alert
- improves memory

2. Physical Activity Levels

“What do you do to stay physically active?”

The most common physical activity was walking. Other responses included:

- walking the dog
- golfing
- aquasize
- curling
- gardening
- swimming
- bowling
- going to the gym
- dancing
- shovelling

- playing with grandchildren
- stretching
- washing the car
- biking
- “sexercise”

Most responses given would be classified as leisure activities (including sport and recreational activities). However, work-time physical activities, such as farming and housework, were also mentioned.

Interestingly, activities typically falling outside the definition of “physical activity” were also mentioned, including:

- singing
- travelling
- shopping
- motorcycle riding
- horseback riding
- camping

Several participants talked about adopting an active living approach to their day-to-day activities. One participant parked her car far away so that she’d have to walk to the store. Another participant mentioned leaving her car about a block away from where she wanted to go.

“If you wanted to be more physically active, what activities would you like to try?”

Participants indicated they’d most likely want to try to do more walking. They also said that they’d like to try:

- bicycling
- golfing
- cross-country skiing
- synchronized swimming
- belly dancing
- clogging
- curling
- disking (similar to curling)
- skating
- aquasize
- going to the gym

Although many participants expressed an interest in trying new activities, one respondent simply replied, “*I don’t know if there’d be anything.*”

“What are your motivations for physical activity and how have they changed over time?”

Participants listed several motivators:

- Health benefits: Participants mentioned physical activity helping “to keep you going,” “to keep you limber” and to keep weight down.
- Declining or poor perceived health: Participants talked about being motivated by a health scare or by sensing that they were “slowing down.” One participant put it this way, “sometimes you have a wakeup call ... I was clinically dead for six hours ... [that’s what] motivated me to get active and keep active ...”
- More time to participate in physical activity: As one participant put it, “when you were working ... you [didn’t] feel like going to the gym after all that.” Another participant said she was, “more active now than I was before ... I never made an effort to be active because ... I was always doing something. And then ... I realized that I wasn’t moving as much. I was sitting more ... so then I had to start thinking about physical activity.” Although some suggested that it was easier to find time in older adulthood to be physically active, others said that, “as you get older ... it’s easier just to sit.”

3. What Determines Physical Activity

“What helps you to be active?”

Participants reported that social support was most likely to help them be physically active. Examples of social support included:

- Receiving encouragement from others.
- Opportunities to interact with other people while being active.
- Having a physical activity partner/buddy.

Other enabling factors included having grandchildren or a dog and work responsibilities that involved physically active tasks (e.g., farming).

Health problems are another factor worth mentioning. Health problems were both a motivator to be more physically active and a reason to limit physical activity.

“What are the barriers to you being active?”

Barriers included:

- weather (snow, icy conditions and cold temperatures)
- perceived safety (e.g., fear of darkness)
- other commitments (too busy)

- not having a friend to be active with
- lack of transportation to get to recreational facilities

4. Content and Design Preferences for New Resources

“Where do you get information about physical activity?”

The most commonly identified sources were newspapers or other local papers/newsletters. Participants also identified the following sources: word of mouth, local organizations and meetings/gatherings, TV, radio and books.

“How do you prefer to receive physical activity information (print, in person, computer, video, television)?”

- Print: Many participants preferred to receive this information from local newspapers, flyers, bulletin boards, etc.
- Public presentations: Several participants suggested public presentations or using existing local organizations to make these presentations. Participants preferred “experts” or professionals to make presentations in their community.
- Computers: Although some participants saw electronic communication as a useful medium, others were concerned that older adults might not be able to access or know how to use this medium.

“Take a look at the resources we have here today. Would you pick up and read any of them? Why or why not?”

- Most participants were quite positive about the materials presented and said that they would pick up and read the types of resources presented.
- Participants found the materials informative and, in general, liked their format and design.
- The word “active” particularly drew their attention.
- Participants also said it was important to highlight the term “older adult.”
- Participants appreciated the interactive aspect of the questionnaires/quizzes/activities that were part of *Canada’s Physical Activity Guide for Older Adults*.
- Despite an overall favourable response, one participant was quite frank about his or her level of involvement with such resources. Was this person the only one who “[had] enough reading” and who would just “skim?”

“If you were asked to help design a physical activity guide for rural seniors, what would you like to see in it?”

- Participants would like information on all of the available physical activities in their areas. They preferred information exclusively on activities being offered to older adults.

- Participants said that they preferred real images over cartoons and that it was important to depict physically active people they could identify with (i.e., older adults from their community if possible).
- Finally, many participants expressed interest in a resource that presented information on specific physical activities they could try as well as the proper way to complete them.

Focus Group Results: Main Themes in Participants' Responses

To further understand participants' responses, we analyzed the content transcripts using methods described in Maykut and Morehouse (1994) and Tesch (1990).

This section includes participants' responses organized by two main themes:

1. Physical activity participation.
2. Developing a physical activity resource for rural older adults.

1. Physical Activity Participation

Benefits

As previously mentioned, participants cited many benefits of physical activity, including physical, psychological and social benefits. As one participant said, “[physical activity] *helps maintain muscle strength.*”

Although physical activity's physical benefits may be better known, several participants also cited psychological benefits, e.g., “*stops you from getting Alzheimer's.*”

Finally, and not surprisingly for older adults especially, participants saw the social aspect of physical activity as important, e.g., “*and we have coffee afterwards and interaction with people.*”



Environmental Barriers

The most commonly cited barrier was winter weather, not surprising given that these focus group interviews took place during the fall of 2006 and winter of 2007.

One participant put it this way, “*as soon as it snows ... we're finished!*” As another participant said, “*haven't got very good sidewalks out there either have they?*” It may not be winter weather itself that is the most serious issue for older adults. The issue may be the perceived lack of safety and risk of falling associated with snowy and/or icy sidewalks.

Opportunities

An issue raised in the focus group interviews is the perceived challenge of living in rural areas. Participants spoke about the nature of their communities, including the lack of:

- Physical activity professionals (“*but in rural areas ... the problem is getting instructors*”).
- Opportunities for recreation/physical activity (“*in the rural area where I am there isn't really much else that you can do out there [but walk]*”).

Participants also discussed the potential for existing community services to work together to provide active living options. In some communities, frustrating liability or cost issues have prevented the use of prime spaces such as the local rink or school gymnasium.

Cues to Action

Some participants saw poor perceived health as a barrier to increased physical activity. For others, poor perceived health motivated them to become more physically active.

As one participant explained, *“my changing health certainly ... motivated me to walk.”* Another participant put it this way, *“well sometimes if you have health problems that makes you think, OK, I have to do something. I have to help myself here.”*

2. Developing a Physical Activity Resource for Rural Older Adults

Information Specific to Older Adults

Participants made it clear that they were keen on obtaining physical activity information, *“as long as it’s geared toward seniors.”* To more effectively reach the older adult group, participants suggested that the information should focus solely on them.

Identifying with Real Images

As previously mentioned, participants preferred “real images” (as opposed to cartoons of people being physically active). As one participant put it, *“if you see [pictures of] people you know, doing the walking trail or whatever, well if they can do it, well why can’t I?”* The key when using illustrations seems to be using images of people with whom rural community members can identify.

Presentations by Professionals

Participants felt that it was important for professionals to deliver health and physical activity related information in person. As one participant put it, *“... it is a good thing to have [professionals] to come and say this to you. Lots of time what you hear from your friends next door isn’t going to be any good.”*

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