

Social Support and Physical Activity in Older Adults: Identifying Predictors Using Data from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging

C. Zimmer & M.H. McDonough

The Purpose

To determine which forms of social support predicted physical activity (PA) in older adults and examine how demographic indicators of groups at higher risk of social isolation affected the associations between forms of social support and PA.

Social support is interpersonal interactions that benefit another person.

The Study

This study analyzed baseline data from 21,491 adults aged 65-89 who were surveyed with the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging. Participants reported on nine forms of social support and were categorized based on demographic factors indicating older adults at increased risk of social isolation.

Results

Social network size, frequency of contact with social network members, and frequency of participation in activities with others were positively and significantly associated with PA. Being in a domestic partnership and perceived tangible support were negatively associated with PA for some people. Specifically, women in a partnership were less physically active compared to women not in a partnership, but being in a partnership was not associated with PA for men. Those who participated more often in activities with others had higher PA levels than those who participated less often, and this effect was strongest for those who lived with other people. For adults who lived with other people, those who perceived more tangible support were less physically active than those who perceived less tangible support. For adults with low income, those who communicated online with family and friends more often were less physically active than those who did so less often.

Take Home Messages

Social support predicts PA among older adults, and these different kinds of support make unique contributions to predicting PA. Different populations may have different social support predictors.

Full report published at: Zimmer, C., & McDonough, M. H. (2021). Social support and physical activity in older adults: Identifying predictors using data from the Canadian longitudinal study on aging. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 1-12. doi:10.1123/japa.2020-0393. Open access at: https://prism.ucalgary.ca/bitstream/handle/1880/113695/Zimmer_McDonough_2021.pdf;jsessionid=5DAB460511A8F417D57F76D3B8040052?sequence=1

Associated with higher PA levels

- Greater number of people in social network
- Higher frequency of contact with people in social network
- Higher frequency of participation in social activities
 - Especially for older adults living with others

Associated with lower PA levels

- For women only, living with a partner or spouse was associated with less PA
- For those living with others, more tangible support was associated with less PA
- For those with low income, more frequent online communication was associated with less PA

Not associated with PA levels

- Amount of affectionate support perceived
- Amount of emotional/informational support perceived
- Frequency of positive social interaction

PA

This research was supported by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), O'Brien Institute for Public Health, and the Brenda Strafford Centre on Aging. Data for this study were collected by the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (funded by the Government of Canada through CIHR and the Canadian Foundation for Innovation). Infographic created by Rowan Van Roessel.

