

HIV and Physical Activity

Making physical activity more accessible for women living with HIV

Background

Recommendations for physical activity indicate that adults in Canada should participate in 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity each week.¹ Physical activity has benefits for people of all ages which include improved learning and long-term memory, lower risk of chronic disease, and increased life expectancy, among other advantages. For people living with chronic health conditions, physical activity can help with managing symptoms, slow down the progression of illness, and prevent development of additional chronic conditions.² Accordingly, physical activity is considered to be a low-cost way to promote chronic disease prevention and to encourage overall

health.³ Several Canadian organizations are dedicated to encouraging physical activity throughout the lives of people in Canada.^{4,5} Community-based HIV organizations and fitness centres also have an important role to play in promoting physical activity people living with HIV, especially women, in the community.



Issue

Despite the known benefits and national-level initiatives, less than 20% of adults in Canada participate in the recommended amount of physical activity.^{6,7} Low levels of participation is the norm for all adults, however women, globally, have higher rates of inactivity than men.⁸ Limited levels of physical activity for women are thought to be the result of gender norms and expectations, low motivation, minimal knowledge of how to exercise, little social support for activity, and fatigue.^{9,10,11,12}

People living with HIV have been found to participate in physical activity at even lower rates than the general population.^{13,14} Reasons for decreased participation can be attributed, at least partially, to various individual and social barriers that people living with HIV may experience such as pain, limited social support, financial constraints, accessibility concerns, and fear of stigma. People living with HIV often live with more comorbid chronic health conditions than the non-HIV infected population.^{15,16} Along with this burden of chronic health conditions, women living with HIV are especially likely to face barriers as a result of their gender and their HIV status.

Recommendations

For reasons including social interaction and motivation, people often prefer to participate in physical activity outside their homes. Common locations for individual or group activities may include settings like fitness facilities, and community-based organizations. However, women living with HIV many not feel comfortable accessing programs in fitness facilities for fear of stigma related to their HIV status, and historically community-based HIV organizations have not offered any physical activity programming or lack the additional features that fitness facilities offer such as showers. As organizations, both fitness facilities and community

-based HIV organizations need to address the unique barriers to participation in physical activity by women living with HIV, including gender roles and expectations, financial constraints, and limited knowledge about how to integrate physical activity into their lives.

Hanlon, 2014, recommends three strategies that can be taken by organizations to encourage and enhance women's participation in physical activity: 1. Creating a welcoming environment; 2. Facilitating involvement; and 3. Promoting the program.¹⁷ These are adapted below to address the unique needs of women living with HIV:

facilities offer such as showers. As or-



1. Creating a Welcoming Environment

a. Social support is a well-known facilitator of physical activity among women. Women are more likely to participate if programming not only promotes physical health, but also fosters relationship-building between participants. Integrating physical activity into group activities (e.g., lunch and learns, coffee groups, group outings) is one way to encourage social connections and make physical activity seem less like a chore.

b. A welcoming environment also relates to the attitudinal factors that increase a person's comfort in a new place. Staff should be encouraged to create an environment that welcomes people of all genders and sexual orientations, supports people with all body types, and is accepting of all health-related diagnoses or challenges. Staff training and ensuring that all images used to promote the location and/or program can help reinforce inclusivity. Incorporating findings from the Women, HIV and Stigma: A Toolkit for Creating Welcoming Spaces (WHA, 2017) could assist in creating that welcoming environment.¹⁸

2. Facilitating Involvement

a. Identify potential barriers such as modest knowledge of physical activity, fear of beginning something new, and female gender roles that conflict with participation (e.g. child and family duties), to name a few, and work towards mitigating them. Accessible programming for beginners and/or those with different abilities, no- or low-cost childcare options, and sliding fee scales are some options that may facilitate involvement of women.

b. Women should be engaged in planning phases physical activity programming. Their input into the goals, activities, schedule, and other features will lead to the development of a program that is meaningful for women.

3. Promoting the Program

a. Direct promotion of the program to women that is encouraging and body positive, can inspire, and enhance their participation. Advertising could be done through women's networking groups, parent-friendly spaces, or women-serving organizations.

b. Fitness facilities and community-based HIV organizations should consider working in partnership with each other to increase the reach of their programs.

These represent three approaches to boosting the participation of women living with HIV in community-based physical activity.

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