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The Physical Activity–Related Barriers and Facilitators Perceived by Men Living in Rural Communities

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Abstract

Men, especially those living in rural areas, experience chronic disease at higher rates than the general population. Physical activity is a well-established protective factor against many chronic diseases; however, only a small fraction of men are meeting national guidelines for physical activity. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived physical activity–related barriers and facilitators experienced by men living in rural areas in Canada. Participants completed a paper-and-pencil or online survey and asked to select personally relevant physical activity-related barriers and facilitators from a list of 9 and 10 choices, respectively. A total of 149 men completed the survey (50.3% between the ages of 18 and 55 years; 43.0% older than 55 years). Participants were predominantly from rural areas and smaller communities. Overall, the response options “I’m too tired,” “I don’t have enough time,” and “I think I get enough exercise as work” were the three most frequently cited barriers to regular physical activity. The response options “Personal motivation to be healthy,” “I enjoy it,” and “Support from family and/or friends” were the three most often cited facilitators to physical activity. Results are similar to those shown in other populations. Results can be used to inform the development of policies and programs that aim to increase the physical activity levels of men living in rural areas and small communities.

Keywords

exercise, general health and wellness, population-based health care issues

Background and Research Question

Men from developed countries living in rural areas have been reported to have higher levels of chronic disease than men who live in urban areas (McGannon, Busanich, Witcher, & Schinke, 2014). It is widely accepted that physical inactivity is an important risk factor for the development of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, and cancer, among others (e.g., Bucksch & Schlicht, 2006; Fine, Philogene, Gramling, Coups, & Sinha, 2004; Nunan, Mahtani, Roberts, & Henegan, 2013; Prentice et al., 2004; Waxman, 2003). Furthermore, men living in rural areas consistently show lower participation rates in physical activity compared with those living in urban areas in the United States (Parks, Housemann, & Brownson, 2003). There is limited research exploring the factors affecting the physical activity behaviors of rural residents, resulting in the call to increase the literature base in this area (Gangness, 2010). The purpose of this study was to explore the physical activity–related barriers and facilitators faced by men living in rural areas and small communities in Canada.

Methods

The survey administered to men, which was developed by the authors for the purposes of this study, contained 18 items, two of which related to the barriers and facilitators to physical activity. The first question asked respondents, “What gets in your way of being physically active?” The item had 10 possible response options, and participants were asked to check all items that applied. Participants had the opportunity to note additional barriers that were not included in the potential options. The second question

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Table 1. Participant Demographics.

	n	%
Age (years)		
18-25	7	4.7
26-35	24	16.1
36-45	17	11.4
46-55	27	18.1
56-65	30	20.1
66-75	33	22.1
76-85	5	3.4
85+	1	0.7
Place of residence		
Rural	39	26.2
Village (<1,000)	16	10.7
Small population center (1,000-29,900)	32	21.5
Medium population center (30,000-99,999)	44	29.5
Large population center (100,000+)	11	7.4

asked respondents, “What helps you to be physically active?” This question had nine possible options, with the same response procedure as noted above for the previous question. A total of 707 surveys were mailed to 19 rural community organizations, including family health teams, recreation centers, and churches. Of the mailed surveys, 119 were completed and returned. In addition, the web link to an online version of the survey (hosted by FluidSurveys, <http://fluidsurveys.com>) was provided to four rural community organizations, resulting in an additional 26 completed surveys. A booth was set up at a rural recreation center whereby research assistants distributed paper-and-pencil surveys, which produced four completed surveys. Frequency analyses were performed using SPSS Version 20.0. All study procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Board at Western University in London, Ontario, Canada.

Results

A total of 149 men ($n_{18-55 \text{ years old}} = 50.3\%$; $n_{56+ \text{ years old}} = 43.0\%$; percentages do not sum to 100 due to missing data) living in Southwestern Ontario communities completed the surveys. A total of 26.2% of respondents described where they lived as “rural”; additionally 32.2% of respondents reported living in small communities with a population of less than 30,000 residents (see Table 1). As such, the current sample was from predominantly rural areas and smaller communities. When asked about their current active behaviors, 46.3% of respondents reported less than 30 minutes of physical activity per day.

In terms of barriers to physical activity, the three that were selected most often were “I’m too tired” (35.6%), “I don’t have enough time” (30.9%), and “I think I get

enough exercise at work” (12.8%). The item selected least often (by 3.4% of respondents) was “No facilities, programs or safe places to walk or bike nearby.” Approximately one quarter (24.8%) of men added an additional barrier that was not included in the available options. The only barriers mentioned by multiple participants included *pain or injury* (mentioned 12 times) and *child-related responsibilities taking priority* (mentioned twice).

With regard to physical activity-related facilitators, the three that were selected most often included “Personal motivation to be healthy” (61.1%), “I enjoy it” (47.7%), and “Support from family and/or friends” (45.6%). The item selected least often was “Money and/or services through a benefit plan at work,” which was cited as a facilitator by 11.4% of respondents. In addition to the given options, 11.4% of respondents presented additional facilitators for physical activity. The only facilitators mentioned by multiple participants included *additional time* (mentioned 5 times) and the *availability of organized sports* (mentioned twice).

Discussion and Recommendations

The three most often cited barriers to engaging in physical activity highlight the barrier that a perceived lack of time and/or energy during leisure time poses in reference to physical activity behaviors. This finding is consistent with research in other male populations that has reported that perceptions of limited time and/or energy negatively influence decisions to be physically active (Allison et al., 2005; Singhal & Siddhu, 2014). The three most often cited facilitators to physical activity reinforce the importance of both the individual and “important others” when fostering an environment supportive of physical activity, which is also consistent with research in other male populations (Allison et al., 2005; Mohamed, Hassan, Weis, Sia, & Wieland, 2014). In terms of limitations; as rigorous demographic data were not collected and the current sample contained a significant subset of respondents who did not live in a rural area or small community, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the broader rural Canadian population. Our results are similar to those reported in studies of other male populations (e.g., Allison et al., 2005; Mohamed et al., 2014; Singhal & Siddhu, 2014), and as such, it may be that programs or policies designed to increase facilitators and/or reduce the barriers to physical activity in other populations could be effective in men living in rural areas or small communities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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