

Seniors stick to fitness routines when they work out together

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Older adults are more likely to stick with a group exercise program if they can do it with people their own age, a new University of British Columbia study has found.

Working out with peers of the same gender doesn't seem to make a difference—it's the age that counts.

"This study points to the importance of age-targeting, but perhaps not gender-targeting, when developing these programs," says UBC kinesiology professor Mark Beauchamp, the study's lead author.

Older [adults](#) worldwide are less active than they should be, with activity levels lowest in the Americas. In Canada, fewer than 15 per cent of people past age 59 meet international [physical activity guidelines](#). Beauchamp and his international team of researchers have been looking for ways to keep people active into old age, because inactivity has been shown to increase risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity and arthritis. It can also lead to physical limitations that affect overall quality of life.

The researchers knew from earlier studies that [older adults](#) prefer to exercise within their own age group. They wanted to find out whether preferences expressed by older adults in surveys would actually lead to greater adherence in practice.

The study recruited 627 adults, averaging 72 years in age, for 12-week exercise classes at YMCA locations in Metro Vancouver. Participants

had the option to extend participation for another 12 weeks afterward. Researchers divided [participants](#) into three workout groups. One group was consistent in age and gender, while another was consistent in age but not gender. Those groups were led by older adult instructors recruited and trained for the study. The third group worked out in a typical YMCA class that was open to all ages and genders, led by a YMCA instructor.

Over the 24-week period, participants who worked out with people their own age attended an average of 9.5 more classes than counterparts in the mixed-age group. Participants in the mixed-age group averaged 24.3 classes. Participants in the same-age, mixed-gender group averaged 33.8 classes, and participants in the same-age, same-gender group averaged 30.7 classes.

The researchers' prediction that same-gender classes would lead to even greater adherence wasn't borne out by the results. This is significant, as it could free facilitators from the cost of providing separate classes for each gender unnecessarily.

Age and [gender](#) groupings weren't the only strategies researchers used to try to strengthen participants' commitment. Participants also received custom T-shirts that identified them as members of a [group](#), and were given opportunities to socialize over coffee following [class](#).

"All of this together points to the power of social connections," Beauchamp said. "If you set the environment up so participants feel a sense of connection or belonging with these other people, then they're more likely to stick with it."

Such strategies would be easy to employ in a variety of physical activity settings such as community centres, fitness clubs and retirement communities, the researchers noted.

In this case, [study participants](#) didn't want the classes to end. Rather than continue their workouts in regular classes, they successfully lobbied the YMCA to continue age-specific sessions after the experiment was over.

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Provided by University of British Columbia

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