

Highly active adults vary their workouts to meet exercise recommendations

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Highly active adults engage in a greater variety of physical activities than do less active adults, finds a new study led by researchers at NYU Rory Meyers College of Nursing.

The study, published in the journal *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, also revealed that walking is the most common type of [exercise](#), followed by cycling and dancing.

Physical activity is a cornerstone of a healthy lifestyle and has been shown to reduce the risk of many illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, certain cancers, and depression. National guidelines recommend that adults get 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise, 75 minutes of vigorous exercise, or a combination of the two each week. However, more than half of U.S. adults do not meet these recommendations.

Physical activity guidelines do not account for the type or variety of activities—for instance, whether someone meets the recommendation by jogging for half an hour five days a week, taking two vigorous boot camp classes, or doing a combination of walking, swimming, and cycling.

"Developing a better understanding of patterns of physical activity, and the individual factors related to these patterns, could inform targeted interventions to increase physical activity," said Susan Malone, Ph.D., RN, an assistant professor at NYU Rory Meyers College of Nursing and the study's lead author.

Malone and her colleagues analyzed patterns of physical activity across multiple dimensions (frequency, [duration](#), and type of exercise) among a national sample of 9,816 U.S. adults using the CDC's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (2003-2006). They also examined demographic and health characteristics and how these factors were linked to different patterns of physical activity.

Notably, the researchers found that highly active adults participate in a greater number of activities, with active adults engaging in at least two

different activity types in the last month and the most active participating in five.

"Since a greater variety of activities was associated with meeting exercise guidelines, mixing up your workouts to vary the type of exercise could be beneficial," said Malone.

Walking is the most common type of physical activity, with more than 30 percent of all adults walking an average of four times a week for roughly 40 minutes at a time. After walking, cycling and dancing are the most popular activities.

Among adults who exercise, the researchers identified five "clusters" of physical activity patterns: low frequency, short duration (13 percent of exercising adults); low frequency, long duration (7 percent); daily frequency, [short duration](#) (55 percent); daily frequency, long duration (7 percent); and high frequency, average duration (18 percent).

High-activity clusters (daily frequency, long duration and high frequency, average duration) had a greater proportion of younger, white, non-smoking men with at least a high school education. In contrast, active women were more likely to engage in short but frequent bouts of activity.

"There are several scheduling and social barriers that could explain why this pattern of shorter, frequent activity may be more attainable for women as compared to men. For instance, research shows that women have less leisure time, reporting an average of 13.2 hours of household labor per week compared to 6.6 hours for men," said Malone.

Finally, the researchers found that 44 percent of adults report no physical activity; adults with [chronic conditions](#) and poor health behaviors like smoking are more likely to fall into this group that does

not exercise. Nonetheless, a small percentage of adults with chronic conditions do exercise regularly, suggesting that they can incorporate [physical activity](#) into their lifestyles.

"When encouraging their patients to exercise, clinicians should not just ask about frequency, but also what types of physical activities their patients do. They may even suggest engaging in a variety of activities," said Malone. "The ultimate goal is to develop targeted interventions to help people stick to their exercise plans and lower their disease risk."

More information: Susan K Malone et al, Habitual physical activity patterns in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, *Translational Behavioral Medicine* (2020). DOI: [10.1093/tbm/ibaa002](https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibaa002)

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