

Modified sports can keep older adults playing

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Modified sports with shorter game times and more focus on fun than winning could prove key to encouraging older Australians to play sport and keep fit.

New Flinders University research has found adults play sport for the [enjoyment](#), to improve their fitness and to socialize, but injuries, illness and family commitments can hamper participation.

"We know that in Australia, two thirds of young people play sport, but this drops to only a third when looking at Australians aged over 55," says study lead author Sarah Crossman, a Ph.D. Candidate in Flinders University's College of Education, Psychology & Social Work.

"However, at this age, people often turn to other [physical activities](#) such as bushwalking or going to the gym so it's not that they don't enjoy physical activity any longer but instead have decided to stop playing organized sport.

"With over a third of Australians likely not to be doing enough exercise each week, organized sport could prove a useful public health tool if we could encourage more people to join or continue playing."

Published in the journal [Psychology of Sport and Exercise](#), the authors reviewed almost 100 existing studies featuring more than 48,000 people to investigate why adults participated in sport and what stopped them.

Improved health was the number one reason reported, followed by enjoyment, desire to improve fitness and achieving [personal goals](#). Social connection was also identified as a strong motivator.

The biggest limitation to participation was found to be injury or illness, followed by family commitments. Finances and [time](#) issues, including [work commitments](#) and limited free time, were also reported as major constraints.

"How and why adults participate in sport is complex and ever-changing, but our research showed that there are generally more positive reasons to play sport than there are restrictions or constraints," says Crossman.

"What this study does then highlight is where sports and community bodies can focus their efforts in a bid to increase adult sport

participation."

Suggestions for clubs include shortening the length of games or competitions to alleviate time pressures and focus on sport enjoyment rather than competition, much like what is done in junior sports programs.

"We have seen the emergence of sports such as walking netball and futsal as a positive approach to addressing some of the restrictions adults face in sport participation, including [health issues](#) and time constraints," says Crossman.

"However, we could take this a step further and design many other modified sports programs focusing on enjoyment and health and importantly include the input of the older players themselves.

"This would allow the programs to accommodate individual preferences such as goal achievement and improving fitness and address the limitations of time and finances, but still retain the essence of organized sport.

"Finally, given enjoyment was identified as a key sport facilitator, it is also important we gain a deeper understanding of what enjoyment means for people of different ages, genders, life stages and in different contexts, in order to best facilitate their future and ongoing participation."

More information: Sarah Crossman et al, Facilitators and constraints to adult sports participation: A systematic review, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102609](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102609)

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