



# How to engage older people In sport and physical activity

A resource for sporting, recreation and fitness clubs

## HOW TO ENGAGE OLDER PEOPLE IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

### A resource for sporting, recreation and fitness clubs

This resource offers sports clubs, recreation and fitness organisations practical strategies and resources to encourage older people to participate in sport and recreation clubs and associations.

Older Victorians are living longer. The ageing population in Australia represents a dramatic evolutionary shift with the number of people aged 65 years and over exceeding the number of children by 2025. With a life expectancy of 87 years, the added years of life for many Victorians are lived free from disability.

There is sound evidence that physical activity improves the health and wellbeing of older Victorians. Being physically active reduces the likelihood of developing chronic diseases, some cancers and some forms of dementia, or delays their progression. Taking part in regular physical activity improves mental health, maintains muscle strength and flexibility, reduces the risk or impact of falls, and retains independence. Physical activity, particularly through sport, recreation and fitness, also provides an essential opportunity for social connection, fun and laughter.

Despite these benefits, people in later life struggle to access appropriate levels of sport or recreation programs while providers often feel uncertain about how to support older people.

This resource aims to assist clubs to provide a welcoming, supportive environment for all people, and especially those in later life so everyone can participate in being physically active. This resource could also be adapted to attract other ages and target groups to clubs and organisations.

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### Key Messages

- Enjoyment, meeting new people and new challenges are major drawcards for older people
- It is essential to build relationships between older people and key people in your club
- It is important to be welcoming and hospitable to older people and not be patronising
- It is important to consult older people about their interests and needs
- Physical activity can be competitive or non-competitive depending on the needs of older people
- Activities may need to be modified to increase enjoyment but key skills and challenges should still be an important part of any activity
- Build a network and share your ideas and resources.

## Why sport and recreation clubs need to encourage older people.

People over 65 years are the fastest growing age group in Australia. Many parts of Victoria have more residents over 65 years of age than those under 15 years. If clubs are to continue to grow, older people need to be involved. For older people, being physically active is essential for an enjoyable and healthy life.

The benefits for your club in encouraging older people include:

- Your membership and supporter base will grow
- Older people are a great resource as they can bring a wealth of experience, skills and business sense to your club by assisting with events, coaching, umpiring and administrative tasks
- New members add vitality and vigour to clubs
- Older people can provide enthusiastic, inspirational role models for younger members
- Team spirit is enhanced by a diversity of members
- Older people bring more local connections.

For older people, being part of a club can provide:

- A great sense of purpose, essential for living a good life
- Regular physical activity which is proven to delay the onset of ill-health, aid recovery from illness and prevent some illnesses, as well as the risk of falls
- Being part of a club is an important way older people can stay connected to others in their community
- Club life can provide a source of fun and laughter
- Physical activity helps people maintain their independence longer
- If an older person has an injury, operation or chronic condition, it will be easier for them to recover if they are fit and have been active.



## How can clubs attract older people?

### 1. Why do older people want to get involved in sport and physical activity?

Older people get involved for a variety of reasons. If you understand the potential reasons for their getting involved, it will make it easier for you to attract older people. When thinking about the benefits for older people to be part of your club or group, ensure you can provide these core opportunities:

- Meeting new people. This is a major reason for older people give for joining a group. You can encourage this by providing a social aspect which could mean refreshments after classes or events
- Having fun is another major reason to participate
- Improving health / fitness
- Enjoying challenges from rewarding activities
- Being accepted as part of a team
- Reducing stress
- Reducing the risk of falls.

### 2. GETTING IN TOUCH WITH OLDER PEOPLE

COTA Victoria can offer links to older people in your community, or to other organisations that may be able to assist you in locating older people who would be interested in your activities. Telephone COTA's Information line on 1300 13 50 90 or go to COTA's website: [www.cotavic.org.au](http://www.cotavic.org.au)

Make a list of the range of organisations involving older people in your community.

Is there someone in the club who has contacts with older people? Use these connections.

Your Local Council will have a list of all the older people's groups and you can ask for appropriate staff, often called Positive Ageing staff.

Seniors Online is a State government website that promotes activities across the State to older people. It is attracting more and more attention and is part of the Seniors Card program. Sports clubs and organisations can list their activities and programs in the directory. The website is <http://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/Home>

You can also try:

- Shopping Centres
- Library noticeboards
- Senior Citizens Centres
- U3A – University of the Third Age
- Life Activity Clubs
- Probus Clubs

- Community organisations
- Neighbourhood Houses
- OM:NI groups – Older Men: New Ideas
- Men’s Sheds
- Retirement villages
- Council programs
- Medical centres.



### 3. How best to communicate with older people?

- Choose your words carefully when talking or communicating to older people. Special attention must be given to countering any negative age stereotypes. Actively identify and counter ageist stereotypes that exist in your club or members. Ageism does matter
- Present a positive, yet realistic view of ageing. Recognise the range of backgrounds of older people. Expect and cater for difference in life experiences, skills, knowledge, values, and expectations
- Humour is often very helpful in enabling people to relax and identify with others. But be careful, most people are now aware of the need to avoid sexist and racist jokes. The same is not true of ageism. Many damaging stereotypes are perpetuated in the name of humour
- Many older people are of non-English speaking background and participate more confidently by using their first language even though they may have functional English. Try to bring in a club member who can speak the language of the person or group
- Always listen to the older person. Seek to understand their concerns, questions, values. An open ended question rather than a yes/no is preferable.

### 4. How best to promote club activities to older people?

You need to give thought to appropriate promotional materials and the language you use. Remember that older people may not see themselves as being ‘old’, so words like ‘senior’, ‘veterans’, ‘masters’, ‘elderly’, ‘mature age’ and ‘older adult’ may be off putting for some. Similarly words like ‘exercise’ or ‘physical’ may also discourage older people. COTA can assist you by reviewing your promotional material. Other things to consider are:

- ‘Word of mouth’ is the best way to attract older people
- ‘Bring a friend’ is another good personal approach
- Council newsletters can reach all households
- Posters can be placed where older people are likely to see them: libraries, shopping centres, citizens’ clubs



- Leaflets give older people something tangible to take away and read. Ensure materials use a large font size, have high colour contrast, and that key information such as place, time and costs are clearly stated
- Local newspapers and radio are a good opportunity for free publicity. Your chances of receiving media coverage are improved if you write a media release about a local person in a positive way with some photos attached. Get to know your local journalists and radio presenters. Local radio is a key source of information for older people, especially ethnic community radio for older people from non-English speaking backgrounds
- Television is great if you can attract the media with a good story
- COTA Connect, COTA's e-newsletter is distributed fortnightly across Victoria and can run your stories or event notices. Contact Brendan O'Dwyer - [bodwyer@cotavic.org.au](mailto:bodwyer@cotavic.org.au)
- Digital media including websites and Facebook are inexpensive ways for promotion.

## 5. How can older people participate in your club or activity?

Consider how older people will participate. Remember the experiences of older people are varied. Some may not have done any physical activity since school, or been part of a club. Others may have been in a club as a child, or supported their children's sports. Think about what part of the club might interest them, and how the club can support this particular person becoming more physically active. Some people may want to participate:

- In a social or modified sport, more like recreation than sport
- In a beginners' group with regular coaching
- As an individual rather than as part of a team activity
- In training or practice rather than competition
- As a volunteer or spectator rather than a competitor
- With a range of other people whether by age group, gender or culture
- In activities that challenge in a range of ways not just physical
- By helping others to participate, or the club to grow.



## Tips to encourage older people to join your club or activity

- Avoid ageist language and jokes. It is essential to always remember the impact of ageist attitudes that might be present and often unintended. Are older people welcomed as a resource and a strength?
- Build partnerships and networks to connect with other clubs and organisations including your Local Government. They can all offer advice, support and ideas on how to improve participation. Local Governments are usually responsible for sporting facilities
- Is your club or facility 'Age Friendly'? Is the facility physically accessible? Do you have a person designated to specifically 'welcome' new people? Will new people feel accepted?
- According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, participation in sport and recreation generally declines with increasing age, with a relatively large decline in participation in people aged 65 years and over. However, while older people were less likely than younger people to have participated at all, those who did were more likely than younger people to participate regularly. So, once older people are part of a club, they are loyal and ongoing members
- It is important to understand what hinders older people from joining a club or organisation.

Here are some tips and responses to older people's concerns. Discuss these with your group:

### **I don't have the time**

*Possible solution:* Cut back the number of games, overs (cricket), holes (golf), and time required to play the sport or activity.

### **It is too competitive**

*Possible solution:* Emphasize the social side. Modify the rules so things don't have to be competitive. Consider not keeping score.

### **I might get hurt**

*Possible solution:* Find out about the person's sports history. Let them know how much more aware sports clubs are now of injury prevention and management. Carry out your usual safety audit and planning for these activities. Explain to potential players that they can play safely at their own level. It may be best if the potential player checks with his or her doctor before starting.

### **I don't have transport**

*Possible solution:* Consider car-pooling, or create travel buddies. Is there another member who can pick up the person and take him or her to the activity? Is public transport nearby? Provide public transport options with maps to assist people to get to the venue. Change the time to allow people to travel by public transport. Choose the best and convenient venue.

### **I can't afford the cost**

*Possible solution:* Don't request a registration fee at the start, and consider regular payments rather than a yearly fee. Remember, older people are more likely to be regular attendees. Offer free sessions, discounts for fees and easy payments. Do not insist on uniforms (except suitable footwear). Provide equipment or consider an equipment library.

**I don't have good health**

*Possible solution:* Emphasize the social side of coming to the club. Modify the rules. Is there something else the person can do? Provide examples of what the person can do that will benefit the club – no pressure. Let them know the benefits of doing any form of activity.

**It's too difficult and I won't cope**

*Possible solution:* emphasize the social side and modify the rules so it does not have to be hard but should be challenging. Make it fun!

**I don't have the skills**

*Possible solution:* Don't embarrass the player. Provide coaching, tuition and support so the person will be keen to continue. Don't use sport jargon.

**I am worried that I won't be accepted or fit into the group**

*Possible solution:* Educate the club members to be accepting and supportive of others. Reassure the older person that your club is a welcoming club for all people and that it looks after everybody.

**I don't like being intimidated by younger people**

*Possible solution:* As above. This is often said when ageism is present.

**I don't know about the sport**

*Possible solution:* Promoting your sport in the right location or through the right channels to attract older people can result in greater awareness of your sport or activity.

**I can't gain physical access to the facility**

*Possible Solution:* Contact your Local Council for a visit to the facility to improve the access. Creating environments and products that are accessible, safe, and easily used by everyone would be beneficial for the club or organisation.

**Make your club approach successful**

- Showcase your club convincing people your club has something for them
- Visit older people's groups to tell them what you have to offer
- Have a 'welcoming' person at the club who also follows up with newcomers. See 'Club Help' website
- Encourage people to bring a partner or friend
- Introduce people gradually and hold a special day/session for newcomers and involve members, volunteers or staff who will make the newcomers welcome. Provide a buddy or support system for newcomers
- Make sure all activities include warm ups, cool downs and stretches
- Provide a child minding service for those who are looking after small children
- Network with other clubs to get fresh ideas, support and share information.



## Case Studies of Ideas

Networking with other groups, sharing ideas and brainstorming is a great way to come up with successful ways to engage older people in sport and physical activity. The following ideas were raised and shared during consultations and discussions with sports clubs, leisure centres and fitness organisations across Macedon Ranges Shire, City of Greater Shepparton and City of Darebin. If you have other ideas and examples please share them or contact Alan Bull – [abull@cotavic.org.au](mailto:abull@cotavic.org.au).

### **Macedon Croquet Club**

This club is already challenging other clubs to come out and play croquet. They have sent one challenge out through the local newspaper to the local 'Over 60's Cricket Club'.

### **Sunbury and Macedon Ranges Over 60's Cricket Club**

This cricket club achieved a photo and article in the local paper which promoted their membership drive. The article was titled 'Bowl up, Seniors'. The club also has an 80 year old who has a pacemaker who returned to cricket last year and is inspiring.

### **"Tatstudio" Fitness Centre Tatura**

A group of local residents at Tatura agreed that they needed a central point to collect and share information. They also needed a driver to lead the promotion of sport and physical activities in the town. The seed has now been sown and they are approaching people and groups around the town to start the ball rolling!!

### **Shepparton Croquet Club**

The croquet club tried to engage new players by offering child care but were discouraged by the regulations required, including the need for police checks on their members. When discussing this with other groups they explained that they did not need to pay for the 'working with children' check if the people were volunteers.

### **Northcote City Soccer Club**

The soccer club has 200 juniors and they realized that meant possibly 400 grandparents who could join in the club's events or support their programs. They are now thinking of a social walking group for older people.

### **Preston Reservoir Bowling Club**

This club, on hearing about the Northcote City Soccer Club's idea of engaging grandparents, offered a bowling program for them.

The club will be holding a special exhibition day to promote their new bowling aid called 'a bowlers arm' but were not sure how to promote it. The club will be supported by the Darebin City Council 'Inclusion' Officer to promote the event. Local networks and contacts are important.

### **Reservoir Leisure Centre and East Reservoir Seniors Citizens Club**

After bringing the leaders of the two clubs together, it was agreed that the Leisure Centre people would visit the Seniors Club and provide exercise programs for their members. Even though the venues are next to each other this was the first time they had got together.

#### **Resources**

- COTA Victoria 1300 13 50 90 – [www.cotavic.org.au](http://www.cotavic.org.au)  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Block Arcade, 98 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne 3000
- Sport and Recreation Victoria - <http://www.dtpli.vic.gov.au/sport-and-recreation>
- Choose Health: Be Active Booklet – Australian Government 2008
- Club Help - <http://www.clubhelp.org.au/>
  - A community guide for inclusiveness
  - Ideas for modifying participation
  - Transport Support Strategies
  - Role Description of a “Welcoming Officer”
- Regional Sports Assemblies - <http://www.regionalsportvictoria.org.au/about-us/regional-sports-assemblies/>
- Seniors Online – Directory of Activities : <http://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/Home>
- Sport England - <http://www.sportengland.org/sport-you/help-for-clubs/clubs/>
- Actively Ageing – A Resource for Masters and Veterans Sport 1995. The Hillary Commission, NZ.