



# WHAT'S STOPPING US? THE GENERATIONAL BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN CANADA

Physical activity is essential to maintaining good health and overall well-being. Despite the many benefits of daily movement, including improved mental health, increased energy and reduced risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease, physical activity levels in Canada remain alarmingly low.

The [2025 ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Adults](#) highlights that **only 46% of adults in Canada are meeting the national physical activity guideline** of 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per week.<sup>1</sup> It also unveils that just 32% of adults are meeting the daily step recommendation of 7,500 per day – a rapid and steep decline from 49% in 2021.<sup>2</sup> A recent ParticipACTION-led survey also found that nearly 9 in 10 people in Canada feel that physical inactivity is an urgent national issue.<sup>3</sup>

This raises an important question: **If physical activity is recognized as being valuable, but participation rates are still so low, what is preventing people from living active lifestyles?**

To better support adults in Canada in moving more, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the perceived barriers they are currently facing and how they differ between generations.

## Barriers to physical activity in Canada

In June 2025, ParticipACTION surveyed 1,500 adults across Canada between the ages of 18 and 64 years who identified having a desire to be physically active. The survey was used to identify which barriers to physical activity resonate the most and to outline patterns across different generations (i.e., Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 2025 ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Adults. Moving Beyond Stagnation: Elevating Physical Activity in Canada. November 2025.

<sup>2</sup> 2021 ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Adults. Moving Toward a Better Normal. November 2021.

<sup>3</sup> ParticipACTION. KPI Mid-Year Survey. September 2025 (n = 1,500).

<sup>4</sup> ParticipACTION. ParticipACTION Barriers and Physical Activity Survey. June 2025.

**Note:** Participants were shown a list of 31 research-informed barriers to physical activity and instructed to indicate whether they consider the item to be a barrier to being active.

## The frustrating five

Five barriers to physical activity consistently emerged across generations:



Lack of motivation



Fatigue and tiredness



Time



Cost



Weather

While this may not be surprising, it is important to note that these barriers relate to individual-level challenges and are common across all four generations. Because survey respondents were already inclined to want to be active, these challenges are arising not from a lack of desire but from the difficulty of turning good intentions into action. Barriers driven by fatigue, stress, and competing priorities may be highlighting an **intention-to-action gap**.

# GENERATIONAL PATTERNS

## Gen Z (18 to 27 years of age)

**“Negative past experiences with physical activity have left me feeling embarrassed, discouraged or afraid of failing, and this is making it difficult to be physically active.”**

— Survey participant, 19 years old

Self-consciousness and lack of confidence emerged as key barriers to physical activity, particularly among younger generations. Gen Z was the only generation to outline concerns about external and internal judgement, which shaped their willingness to be physically active. These findings suggest that increasing this generation’s comfort levels so that they feel confident participating in physical activity may be key to improving their engagement.

Gen Z survey participants also reported the highest number of barriers overall, suggesting that they face a uniquely challenging environment for getting and staying active. Other barriers they identified included having nobody to be active with and lack of space at home. This pattern is distinct for Gen Z compared to other generations, with multiple barriers emerging as the most prominent challenges.

### Recommendation:

To address the barriers of self-consciousness and lack of confidence, developing programming such as low-pressure, peer-led group programs (e.g., 30-minute beginner walks) and offering low-cost, drop-in and socially engaging programs would help better target Gen Z.

## Millennials (28 to 43 years of age)

**“When I get back from work, I usually feel tired, and this stops me from going out and being active.”**

— Survey participant, 34 years old

Millennials indicated work obligations as a common barrier, and it is more prevalent among this generation than among Gen Z. This finding suggests that career progression is likely to impact their ability to fit physical activity into their evolving routines.

Finding physical activity boring was another barrier for Millennials. This could be related to the changing opportunities to participate in physical activity, such as moving away from recreational sport and feeling obligated to participate in physical activity solely for health and fitness.

### Recommendation:

Highlighting ways to sneak in physical activity in short bursts (e.g., finding time to add 1,000 steps a day or 10 minutes of walking) could better resonate with and engage Millennials who are struggling to fit in physical activity among their competing priorities.

## Generation X (44 to 58 years of age)

**“I have nerve pain in my back that varies in intensity from day to day. I’m worried about injuring my back and being unable to move because of it. This makes it hard to be physically active.”**

— Survey participant, 47 years old

Based on the survey findings, finding physical activity boring is a more relevant barrier among Gen X. This suggests that the perception of physical activity may shift and become increasingly seen as a necessary activity for improved longevity and health span instead of a fun, social or entertaining experience.

Disability, injury or health conditions also emerged as a barrier among Gen X and Baby Boomers, suggesting that as people age, chronic health conditions may become a stronger factor preventing people from getting active.

### Recommendation:

Barriers related to aging and health are more prominent among Gen X and Baby Boomers. Ensuring that programs are accessible and tailored to support distinct health conditions will support these groups in feeling more confident to participate in physical activity.

## Baby Boomers (59 to 64 years of age)

**“With aging, I struggle with frequent fatigue and medical issues like asthma and arthritis that limit my ability to exercise.”**

— Survey participant, 64 years old

Unlike other generations, lack of time was not among the top 10 most common barriers for Baby Boomers. This is likely because this generation is retired or nearing retirement and may have more time and autonomy to dedicate to physical activity than younger generations. This suggests that messaging about finding time to fit in physical activity would likely not resonate with this generation, and a different approach is needed.

Aging-related barriers, including age itself, fear of injury, having a disability, injury or health condition were reported the most by Baby Boomers compared to other generations. These findings suggest that as people become older, barriers related to aging and health concerns emerge as some of the biggest barriers to physical activity.

### Recommendation:

For messaging and programs to resonate with Baby Boomers, focus on highlighting that physical activity is still accessible and can be done by older adults with varying abilities. In addition, ensuring that facilities and active spaces are designed to be welcoming, safe and inclusive will better engage Baby Boomers.





# ADDRESSING THE INTENTION-TO-ACTION GAP

In summary, the survey findings demonstrate that the top barriers to physical activity across generations (i.e., time, fatigue, motivation, cost and weather) relate to individual-level or environmental challenges.

In addition to increasing public education and implementing organized regional, provincial/territorial and national programs, strategies and plans to improve physical activity levels also need to focus on reducing the effort required to be active and how to integrate movement into everyday life, including daily commutes and workplaces. Investing in supportive environments for getting active, implementing policies such as paid time off for employees to participate

in physical activity and developing infrastructure that makes communities more walkable and bike-able could make physical activity accessible, habitual and restorative rather than an additional obligation for adults in Canada.

However, no organization, government or individual can create change alone. A fulsome, whole-society approach that brings together all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, urban planners, researchers, communities and individuals is required to break down barriers and create a healthier and more active Canada.



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