

Women In Their Older Years, Diabetes, Obesity, and Physical Activity

Assisting older women with meeting the social, physiological and psychological challenges of diabetes and its complications can impact their quality of life.



Success Story of an Older Women and her Diabetes:

Eva, who is now 65 years old, has had type 2 diabetes since she was 29 years old. She says that managing diabetes in the older years can be tough because older people often have special challenges that other age groups may not readily have to deal with, like arthritis, depression, and memory loss. Older people facing these challenges may have trouble remembering to take their medications or diet restrictions. Eva says that having friends and family members who check in on her and who buy her nutritious groceries has helped her out tremendously. She says that there have been several times when she has felt so depressed that, although she knew she needed to eat healthfully and exercise, she could not get the energy to get out of bed. Having people to talk with in a support group and family members who come to visit have all given Eva a new outlook on her life with diabetes. She admits that it is tough being alone trying to manage diabetes by herself. As a support group leader now, she gets strength from others in the group as they share their common stories and successes with managing diabetes.



Prevalence (%) of diabetes, inadequate physical activity, overweight, and obesity among US women

	Diabetes ¹	No Physical Activity in Past Month	Insufficient Physical Activity ²	Overweight (BMI =25-29.99)	Obese (BMI >=30)
Race					
White	13.0	35.4	33.2	32.3	18.0
Black	24.8	45.8	29.4	28.4	35.1
Asian	21.1	37.1	43.4	25.3	9.5
American Indian	32.7	37.6	22.0	31.2	33.4
Multiracial	21.0	35.0	32.0	26.0	26.8
Hispanic	23.7	40.4	30.8	28.6	23.8
Education					
Less than HS	21.4	50.3	26.8	31.5	25.4
HS grad	15.1	39.4	33.6	32.1	21.3
Some college/tech.	13.9	30.5	34.9	30.9	17.7
4 or more years college	9.7	23.7	33.5	31.0	13.5
Income					
<\$15,000	22.4	46.9	30.4	32.0	25.5
\$15-24,999	15.2	40.2	34.5	32.7	23.7
\$25-34,999	13.7	30.6	37.7	32.2	20.3
\$35-49,999	11.9	28.3	35.8	34.2	17.6
\$50,000+	8.6	20.8	35.0	32.5	14.0

1. Not including gestational diabetes 2. Moderate physical activity for 30 minutes or more per day for five or more days per week or vigorous physical activity for 20 minutes or more per day for three or more days per week

Issues that affect older women, diabetes, and physical activity:

- Women make up a greater proportion of the elderly population; older women with diabetes outnumber the elderly men with diabetes and live longer than their male counterparts.
- Diabetes is one of the leading underlying causes of death among women aged 65 years and older.
- Being older and having diabetes accelerates the development of diabetes complications such as heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, and blindness. Elderly women with diabetes are at particularly high risk for coronary heart disease, visual problems, hyperglycemia or hypoglycemia, and depression.
- Older women perceive sports as male oriented or associated with professional athletes. Older women perceive the term “leisure-time” as inactivity or having time to oneself and not a time to engage in physical activity. Walking is the most frequent type of physical activity engaged in by older women as they perform their occupational, household and family care-giver duties.



The National Public Health Initiative on Diabetes and Women’s Health recommends the following public health actions:

Diabetes Awareness:

Educate women and providers to increase their awareness about diabetes, its risk factors, its preventability where applicable through lifestyle choices, and its association with other chronic diseases (for example, cardiovascular disease).

- Assess and evaluate existing messages, programs, and campaigns.
- Increase the awareness of women and providers about the positive impact on both the quality and length of life for women with diabetes through preventing and delaying heart disease.
- Develop an effective social marketing campaign, using focus groups or other qualitative methods.
- Design and test messages and determine dissemination strategies for specific population subgroups.

Diabetes Management:

- Promote disease management programs for older women so that diabetes is controlled and complications and/or disability are either delayed or prevented. Due to their vulnerability as an older adult they frequently lack social support networks, live in poverty, have lower education levels, and at risk for social isolation.
- Train future health professionals about women's health and diabetes to ensure that they are able to communicate with women and address their unique concerns.

Preventive Measures:

- Promote self-management of diabetes for self-efficacy in the older woman
- Promote best practices with providers so that the standards of medical care are achieved for older women including annual immunizations, retinal eye examinations, laboratory tests for HgA1c, lipid profiles, and kidney function, and foot examinations.

Expand intergenerational programs and activities:

- Encourage relationships among women across the life span.
- Define the optimal parameters of intergenerational programs and activities.
- Identify barriers and enabling factors to participation in intergenerational programs.
- Identify existing successful programs and activities in urban/rural areas and different ethnic/cultural groups through qualitative and quantitative public health research.
- Use schools, churches, and other key venues within communities to create activities and occasions for women of all generations to congregate.
- Adapt and refine the current national physical activity recommendations for this targeted group.

Research Agenda:

- What interventions will have the best effect on long-term outcomes and improved quality of life?
- How can the delivery of preventive services, building on existing systems, be improved for older women?
- Additional research is needed to address sub-groups such as the frail at risk elderly. Focus research efforts on cognitive functioning, disability, social isolation, and physical activity among elders 85 years of age and older.

The Call to Action:

- Inform professionals working with older women about diabetes and the relationship of being overweight, or obese, and the need for increased physical activity.
- Utilize the *Guide to Community Preventive Services and Physical Activity* to guide interventions.
- Spread the message of the CDC Women's Health and Diabetes Initiative.



This is a product of the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors, Women's Health Council and the Women, Physical Activity, Obesity, and Diabetes Steering Committee

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This product was funded by a contract from US PHHS Office on Women's Health

