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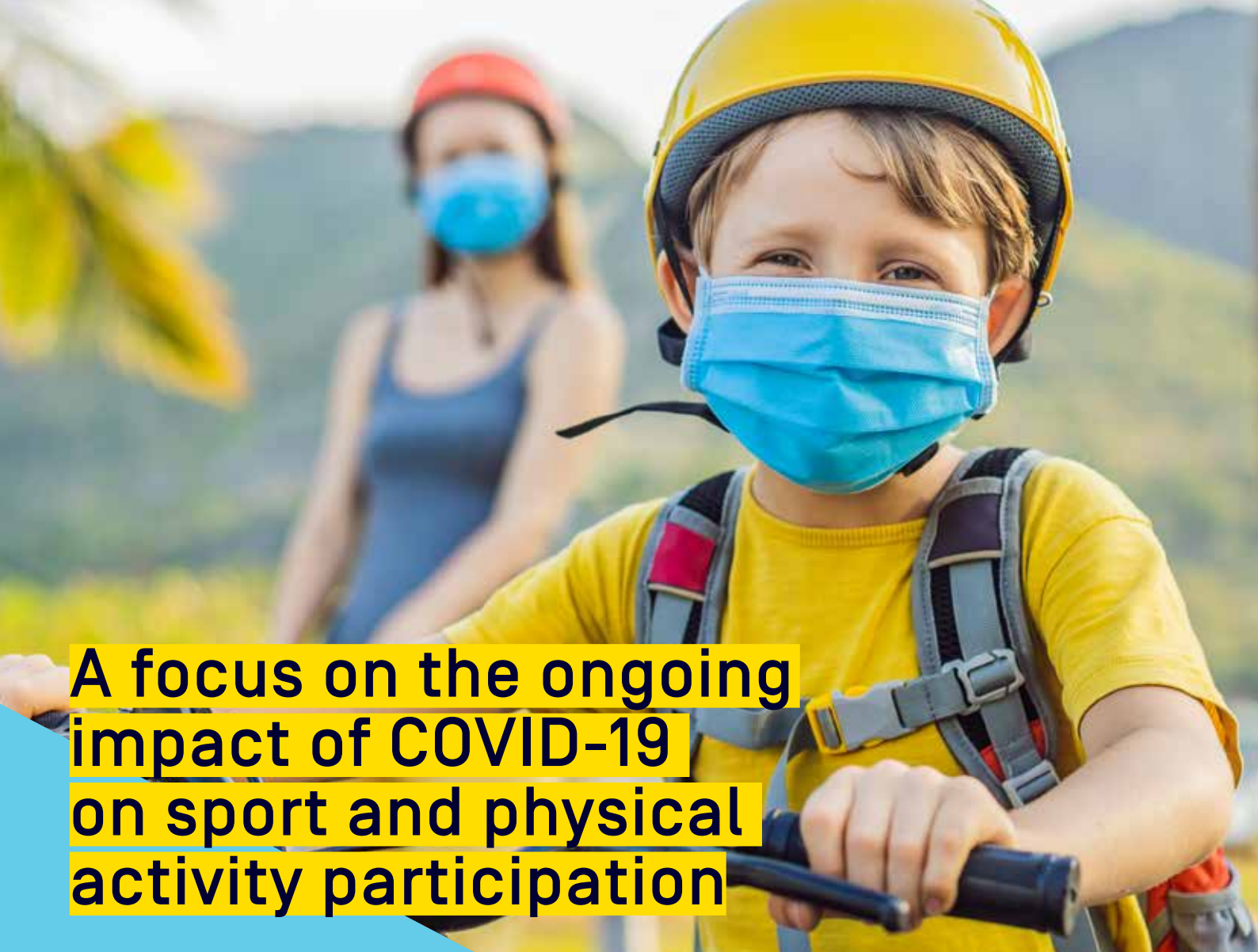
AusPlay Focus

**Ongoing impact of
COVID-19 on sport
and physical activity
participation**

June 2021 update

sportaus.gov.au





A focus on the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on sport and physical activity participation

The Australian Government is working to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians and build stronger communities through participation and involvement with sport.

The ability for Australians to be active in their communities has been interrupted since COVID-19 was first confirmed in Australia in late January 2020. In particular, the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on organised sport as these gatherings were put on hold to adhere to health advice. The Australian Government, through Sport Australia and the Australian Institute of Sport, has helped sporting organisations adapt to a COVID-19 environment and a safe return to sport when possible. We've also kept in touch with the Australian community during the pandemic to understand how their activity behaviours have changed and how they're feeling about getting involved in sport.

As such, the data in this report is sourced from two surveys of the Australian community that are funded and led by Sport Australia:

- AusPlay – the only national population survey of adults aged 15 or over and children 0-14 about their participation in sport and physical activity; and
- Community Perceptions Monitor – a monthly survey of Australian adults aged 18 or over on a range of topics related to sport and physical activity.

About this report



This report is designed to be a continuation of the [Early impact of COVID-19 on sport and physical activity participation report](#) published in October 2020. Readers should consult that report for background and contextual information to help understand the results.

AusPlay

AusPlay commenced in October 2015 and is the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind ever conducted in Australia. Each year, 20,000 adults aged 15 or over complete the survey. Apart from providing information about their own participation, parents/guardians of children under the age of 15 are asked about the physical activities undertaken by one of their children.*

Whilst AusPlay collects all physical activity adults have participated in, it is important to appreciate that information is not collected on children's school activities or casual play outside of school as many parents/guardians aren't able to provide this information accurately.

Respondents are asked about their participation in sport and physical activity in the 12 months prior to interview. These interviews are conducted by mobile telephone and were able to continue uninterrupted during COVID-19.

New questions were added to AusPlay during the first wave of COVID-19 (April-June 2020) and periods of national lockdown. These questions had a seven-day recall to understand recent participation behaviours and results were included in the October 2020 report. After June 2020 AusPlay reverted to its standard 12-month recall questions designed to track long-term trends.

* AusPlay collects data from one randomly selected parent and one randomly selected child in the same household.

Community Perceptions Monitor

The Community Perceptions Monitor (CPM) captures public attitudes towards various aspects of sport through an ongoing survey of 500 Australians each month.

From April 2020 onwards (still ongoing), it included some questions about the impact of COVID-19 on people's lives generally and on sport in particular. From June 2020 it also included questions on attitudes and concerns about returning to sport.

The survey is conducted in the first two weeks of each month among adults aged 18+, using an online methodology. Data is weighted to be representative of the Australian adult population. Depending on the data item, results may be based on one or more months' responses.



What's new since October 2020

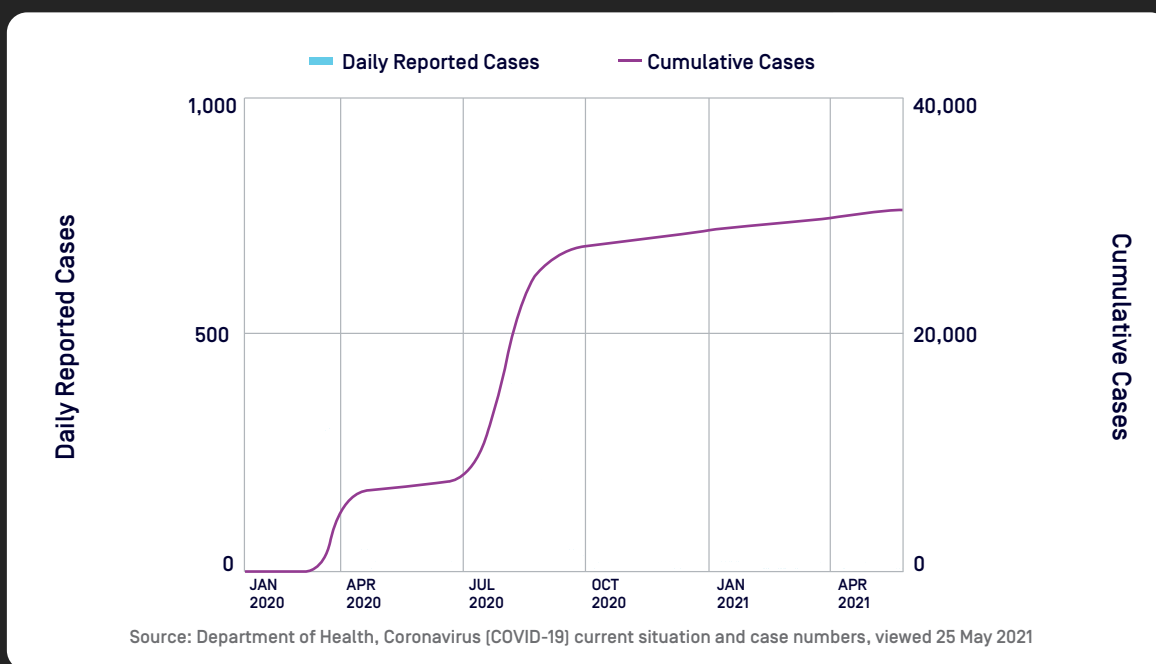
AusPlay 12-month recall data collected from July – December 2020.

CPM data collected from October 2020 – March 2021.

Key dates for COVID-19

This report uses AusPlay data collected until the end of the 2020 calendar year. Most of that year coincided with COVID-19 which, for the first wave, peaked in late March and then continued through April and May until the second wave hit Victoria in June.

The bulk of this second wave occurred in July and August before it was largely brought under control in September. Victoria experienced significant disruption through lockdowns and border closure over these three months. Data collected during this period serves as a useful case study in this report.



Identifying the ongoing signals of COVID-19 in long-term data

A case study comparing July-September 2020 with July-September 2019

AusPlay was designed to measure participation changes over the long-term. Its purpose is to track trends and it takes years of data collection for these to be revealed. The survey was not designed to measure the impact of short-term events, particularly those that might last less than a year. However, at the time of writing this report COVID-19 had disrupted the lives of Australians for over 12 months and AusPlay data was available for the first nine of those months – April to December 2020. Interviews conducted in this period cover the time when the bulk of COVID-19 cases were identified in Australia.



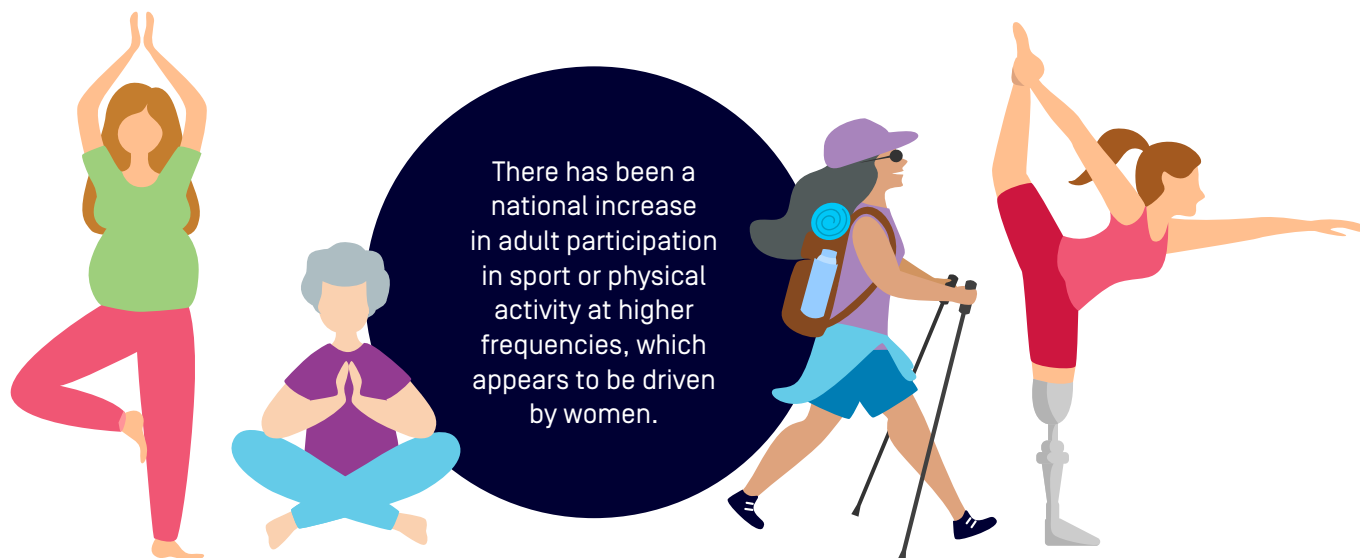
Last October we looked at April-June 2020 (first wave of COVID-19) and now we can add July-September 2020 (second wave of COVID-19).

When we compare this data with equivalent periods from the previous year the ongoing signals of COVID-19's influence are evident.



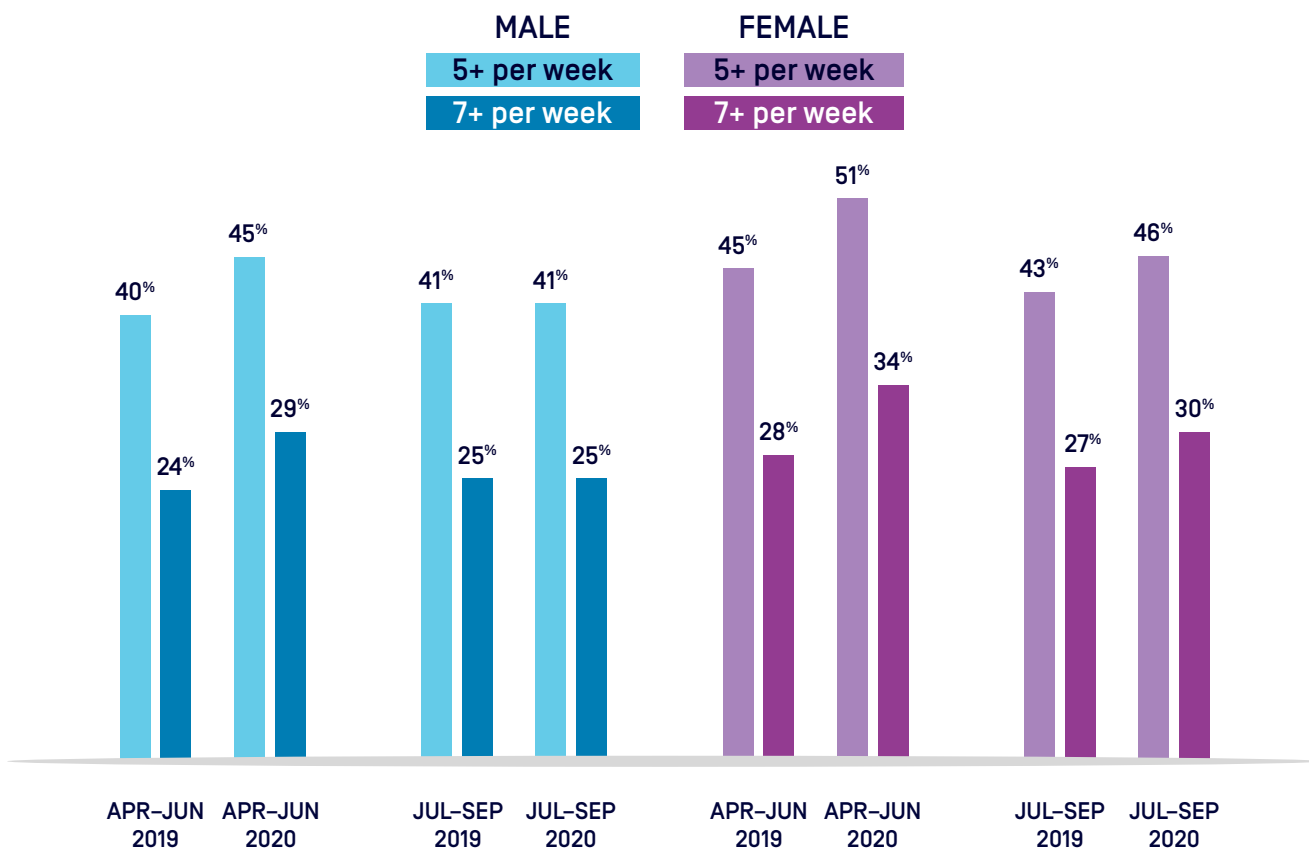
Daily exercise was one of the permissible reasons to leave home during COVID-19 lockdowns, which may have initially prompted (or perhaps necessitated) the need for more frequent participation.

Last October, using April-June data for 2019 and 2020, we observed that as participation frequency increased so did the gap between participation rates for both males and females. Data collected during July-September suggests that increased high frequency participation was only sustained by females.



There has been a national increase in adult participation in sport or physical activity at higher frequencies, which appears to be driven by women.

PARTICIPATION FREQUENCY BY GENDER

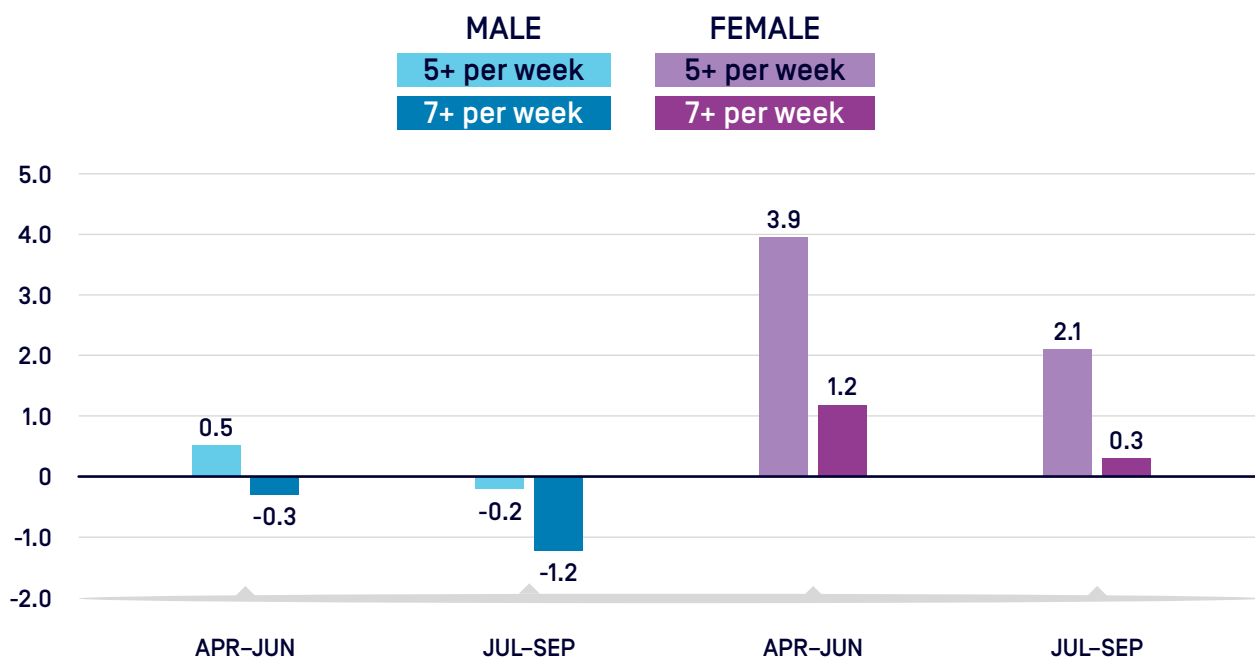


Participation rates for Australia's most popular physical activity, recreational walking — which continued to be popular during COVID-19 — provide further insight.



PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE IN WALKING PARTICIPATION RATE BY GENDER

The numbers below are the percentage point difference in participation for each quarter in 2020 compared with 2019.



Whilst changes in the national walking participation rates for 7+ per week were negligible, the increases in female 5+ per week walking participation of 3.9 and 2.1 percentage points are notable.

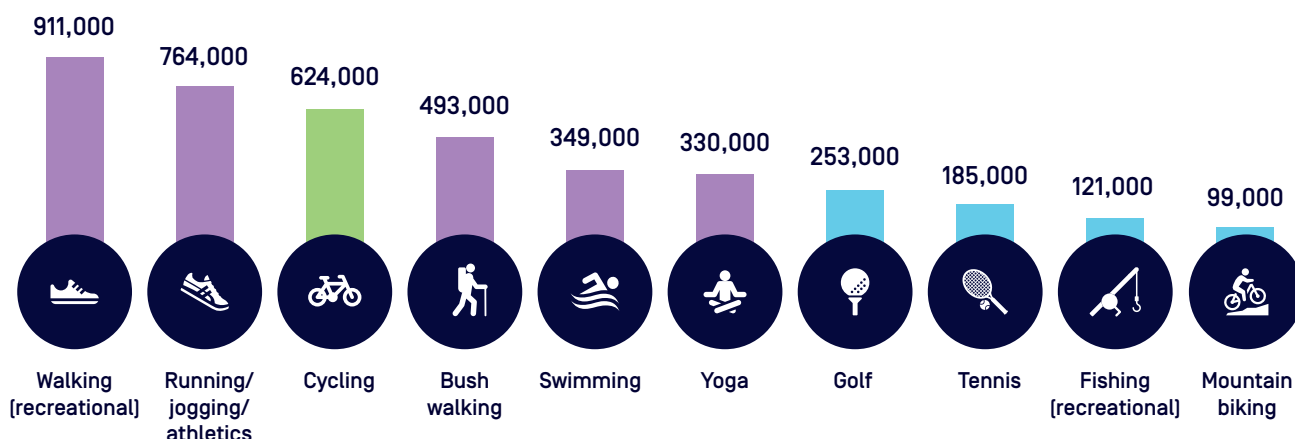
Although walking is a main contributor to increases in high frequency participation, when we consider all participation [i.e. at least once per year], other activities that were accessible in a COVID-19 environment or able to be performed socially distanced also experienced increases from 2019 to 2020. The activities below experienced statistically significant increases in their estimated number of participants nationally year-on-year.

ESTIMATED INCREASE IN PARTICIPANTS FROM 2019–2020

More women than men

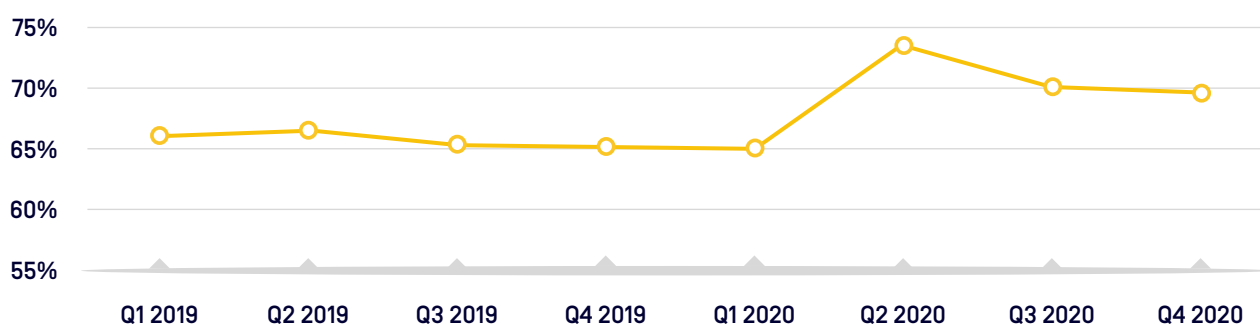
More men than women

Similar number of men and women



The top five of these activities have previously been reported in AusPlay within a category called 'endurance/health'. When participation rates for endurance/health activities are plotted across 2019 and 2020 by quarter, a sustained increase in participation for this category of activities after COVID-19 commenced is evident.

PARTICIPATION IN ENDURANCE/HEALTH ACTIVITIES*



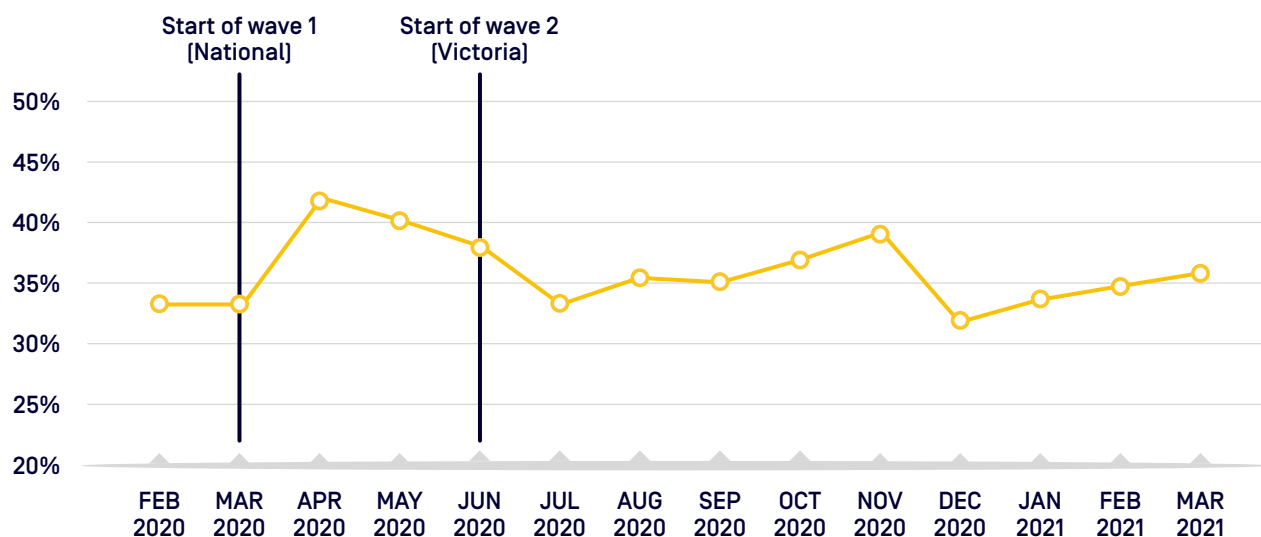
* Endurance/health activities includes: walking, running/jogging/athletics, cycling, bush walking, swimming and rowing.



Further insight into these changes in participation can be found in results from the monthly Community Perceptions Monitor, which is designed to be more sensitive to events as they occur. Data collected during COVID-19 indicates that some adults became more physically active on purpose.

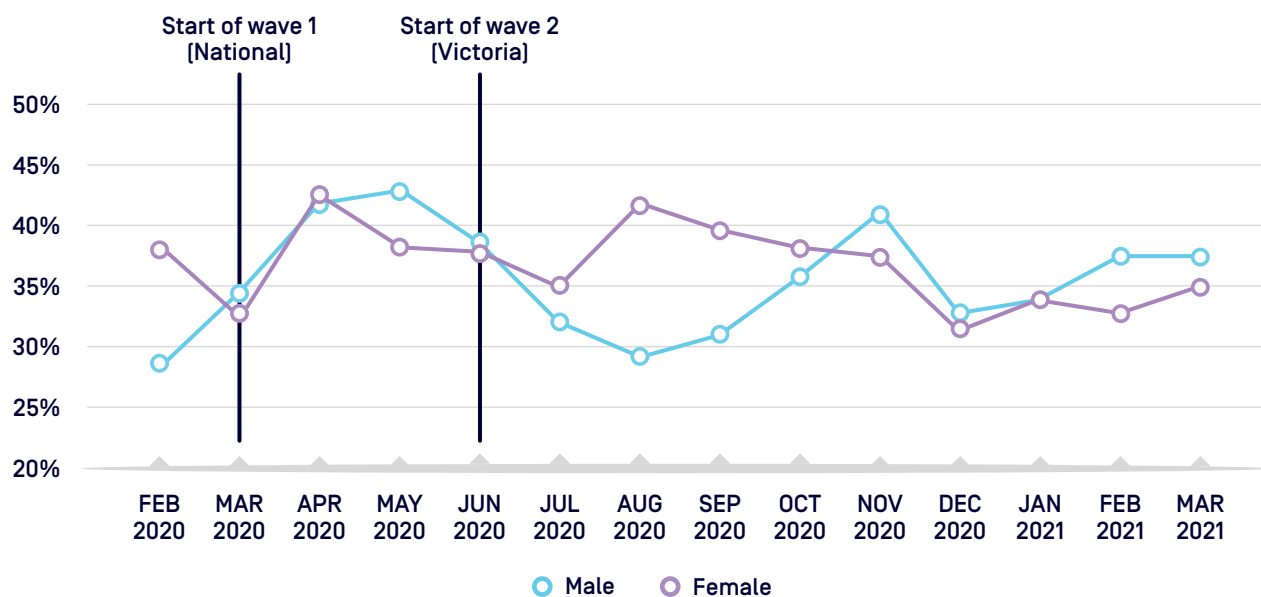
A pattern emerged where adults became more active on purpose with each wave of the pandemic. Wave one had periods of lockdown across the country reflecting a sharp increase in the percentage of adults saying they became more active on purpose. Wave two had a long tail through to November and, although largely in Victoria, was still significant enough to have a slower but steady impact on the national data.

BECAME MORE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE ON PURPOSE



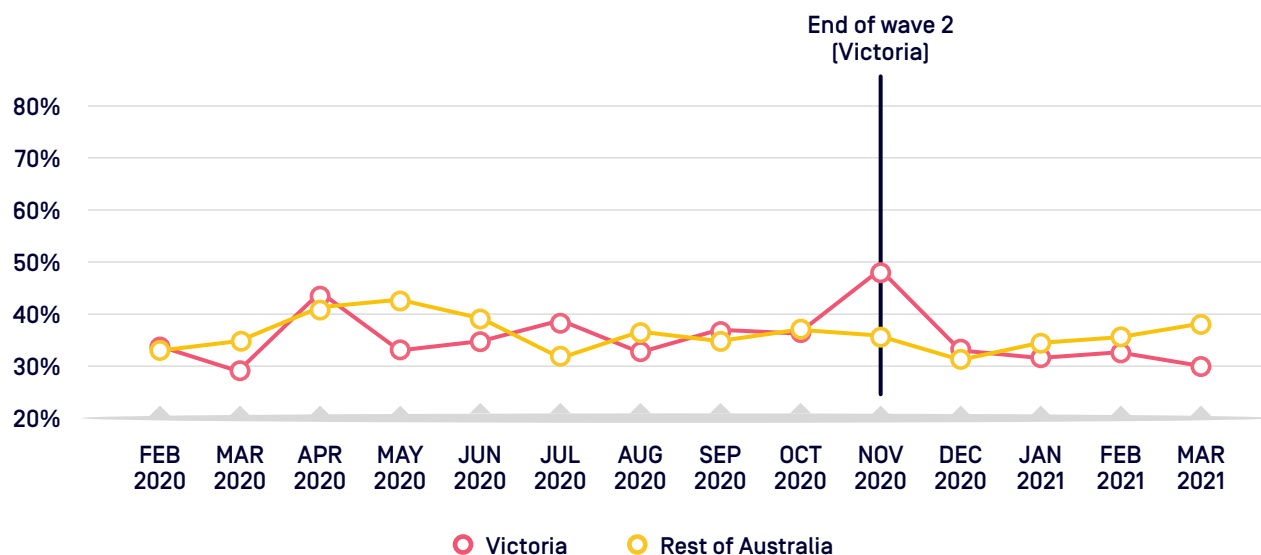
Females have been consistent in becoming more active on purpose across both waves of the pandemic. In contrast, the male data shows pronounced peaks and troughs, which may be explained by established activity behaviour. Women are more likely than men to participate in the types of physical activity, such as walking for daily exercise, which were still possible during periods of lockdown. Conversely, males play more organised sport, which was turned off and on throughout 2020.

BECAME MORE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE ON PURPOSE BY GENDER



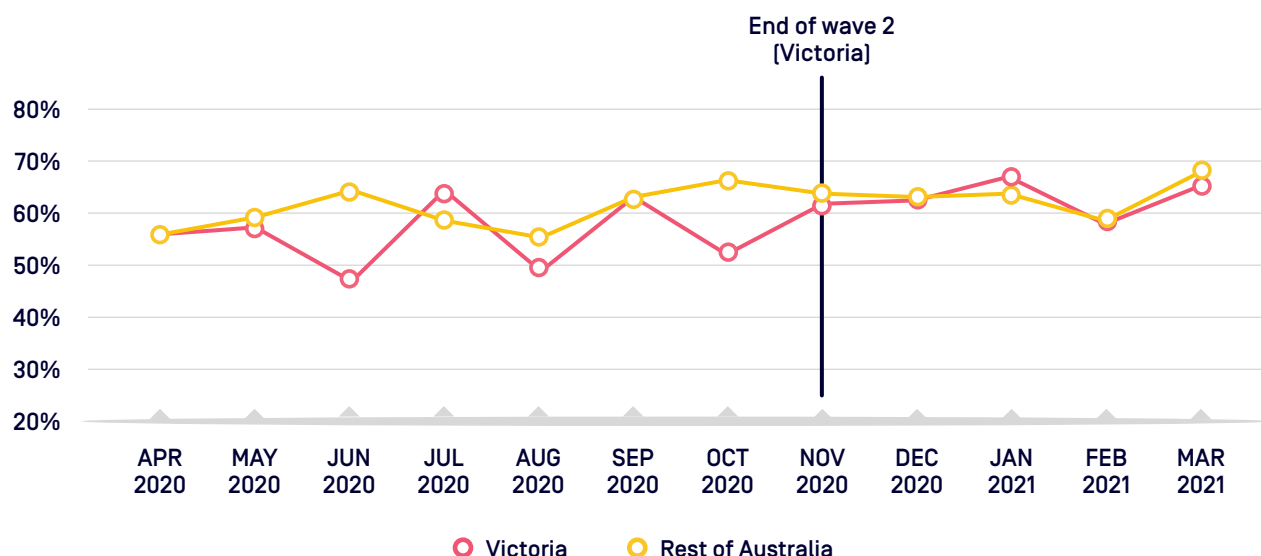
Males becoming more purposefully active in late 2020 coincided with the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in Victoria and a return to sport. Sport in regional Victoria returned in October as the state exited the second wave, then in November more sport was allowed in Melbourne and the 'ring of steel' around the city was lifted.

BECAME MORE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE ON PURPOSE BY LOCATION



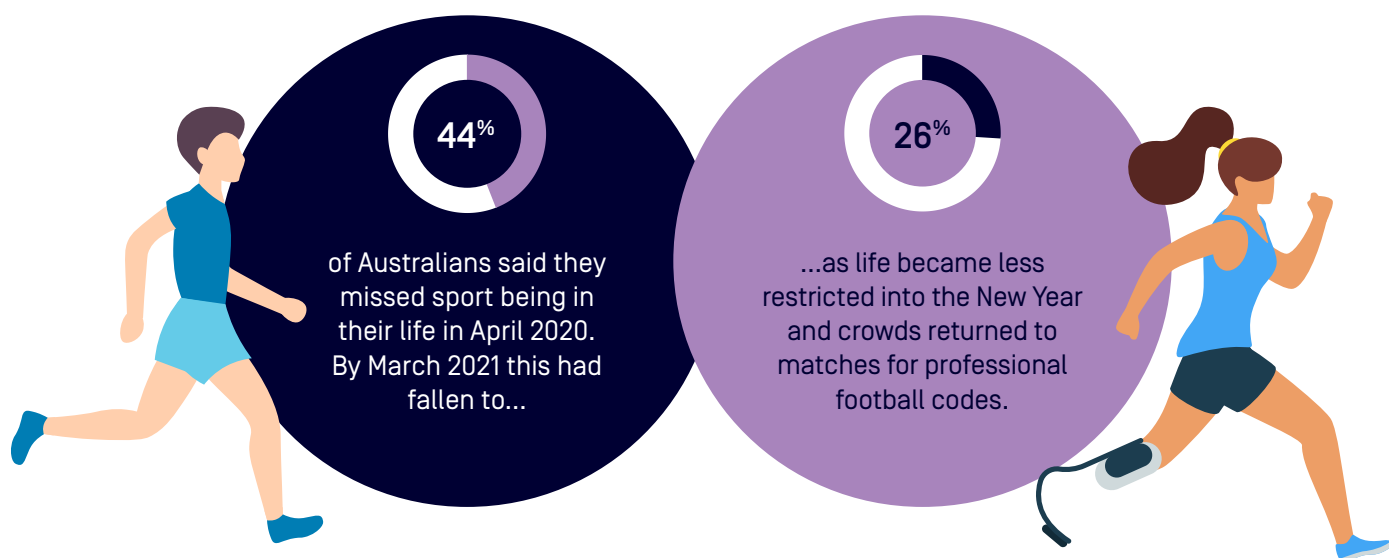
Around the same time there was an increase in Victorians saying it was easy to keep fit and active. From November onwards there have been fewer COVID-19-related restrictions placed on community sport and feelings about the ease of keeping active stabilised in all parts of the country as Australia got back to 'normal' around Christmas and into the New Year.

IT IS REASONABLY EASY UNDER THE CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES FOR ME TO KEEP FIT AND ACTIVE

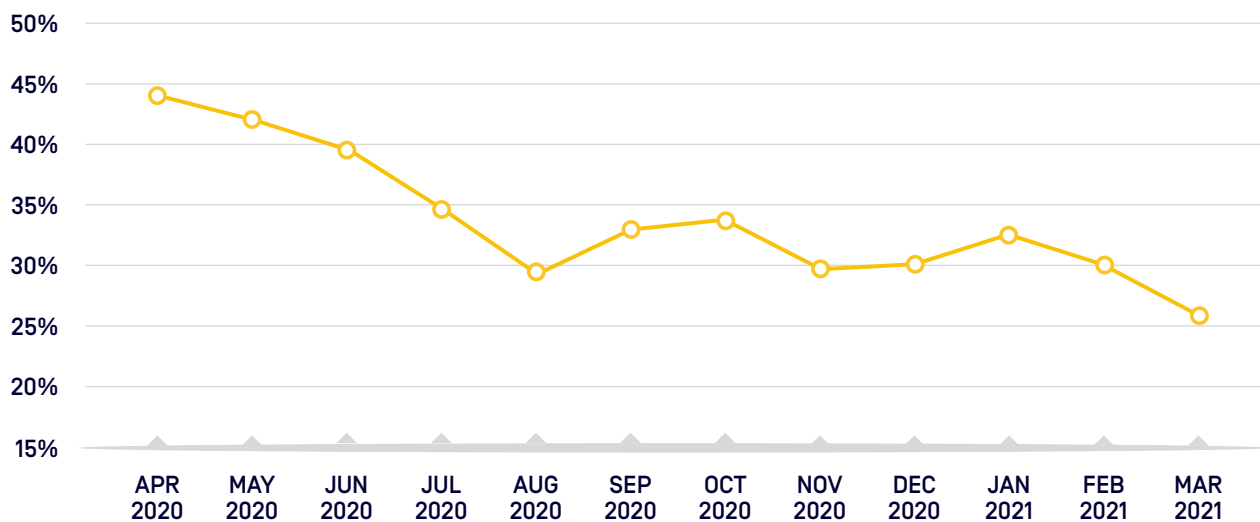


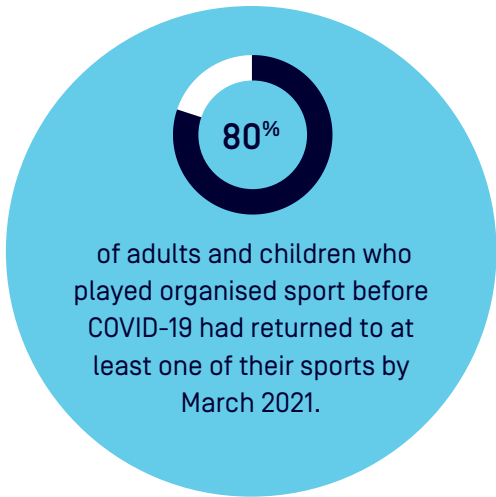
Getting back to 'normal'

Other results from the CPM in January-March 2021 show how Australians feel about sport, including getting back to playing or volunteering in organised sport since restrictions have eased, and any concerns they have about doing so.

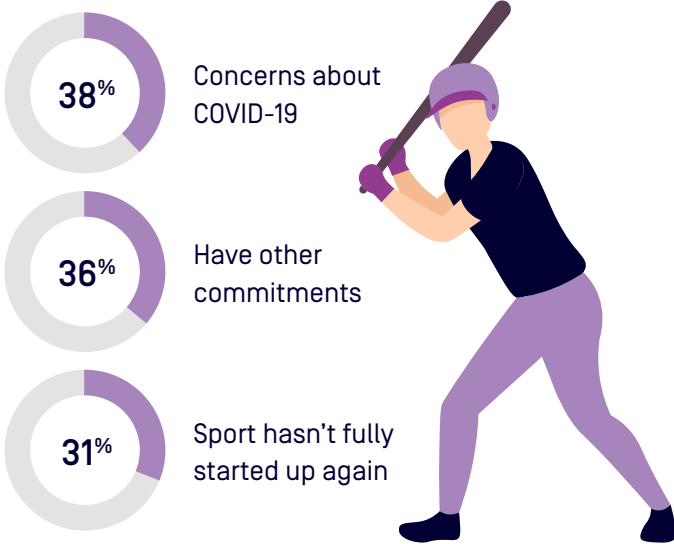


BEYOND BEING ACTIVE, AT THE MOMENT I REALLY FEEL LIKE I AM MISSING SPORT BEING IN MY LIFE

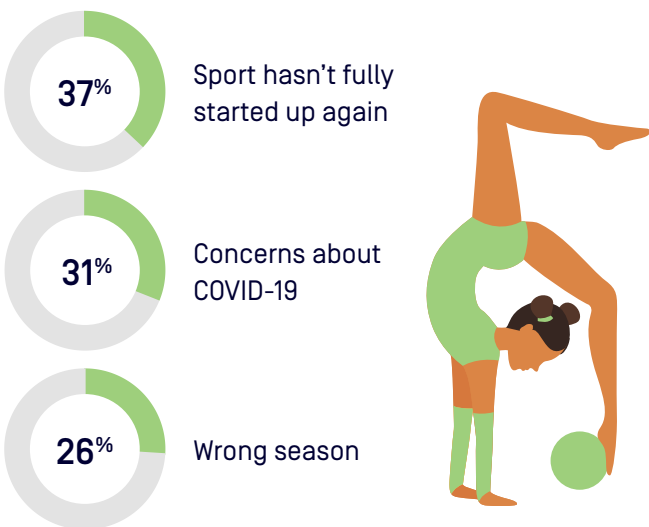




For **adults** who haven't returned the top reasons were:



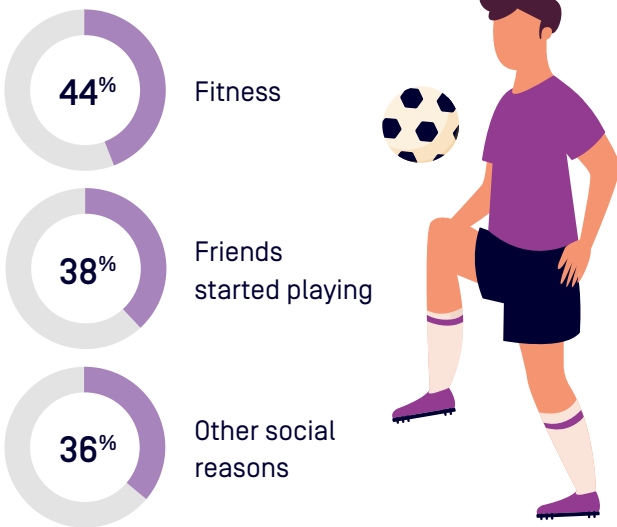
For **children** who haven't returned the top reasons were:



Some Australians had even taken up a new organised sport by March 2021. Most were already participants in other sports, but some had not played any organised sport in the 12 months before COVID-19.



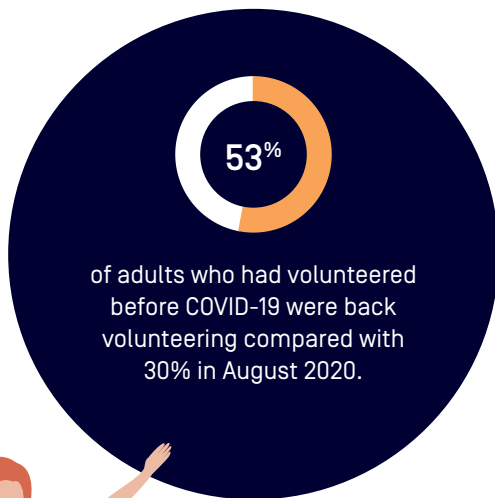
For **adults** the most common drivers for taking up a new sport were:



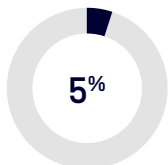
For **children** the most common drivers for taking up a new sport were:



CPM results from January–March 2021 show that volunteers are also returning, albeit more slowly.

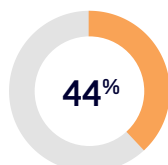


Prior to COVID-19 AusPlay estimated that 3.1 million Australian adults volunteered in sport or physical activity. These volunteers, and new ones, are needed now more than ever to rebuild sporting communities impacted by the pandemic.

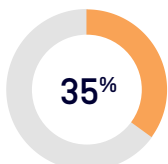


By March 2021, some adults had even started volunteering in an organised sport for the first time since COVID-19.

The primary motivations for starting were:



Wanting to do something for the community



Social reasons

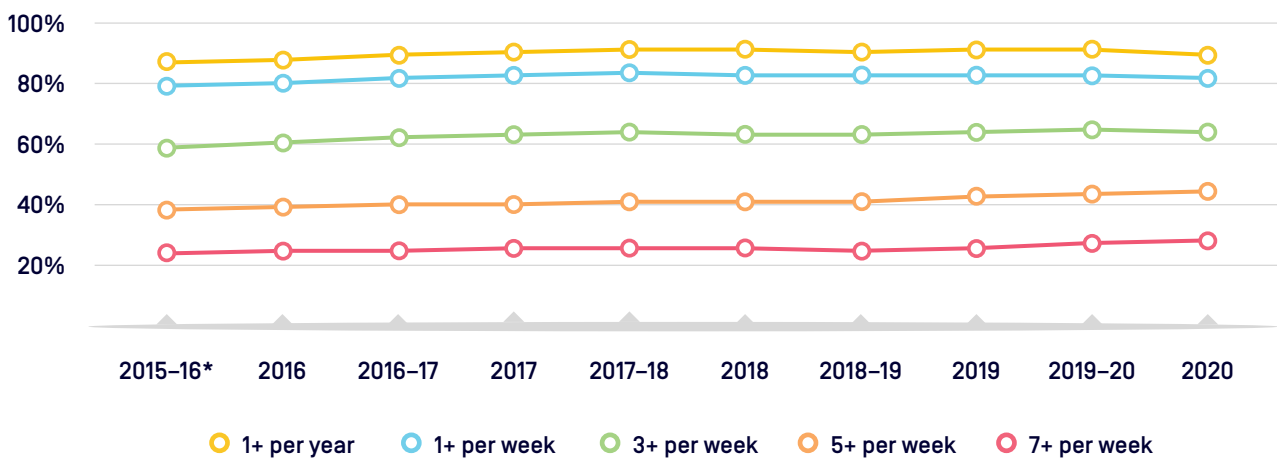
We encourage all Australians, even if you've never volunteered before, to **find your local sporting club** and get involved.



The impact of COVID-19 on participation trends

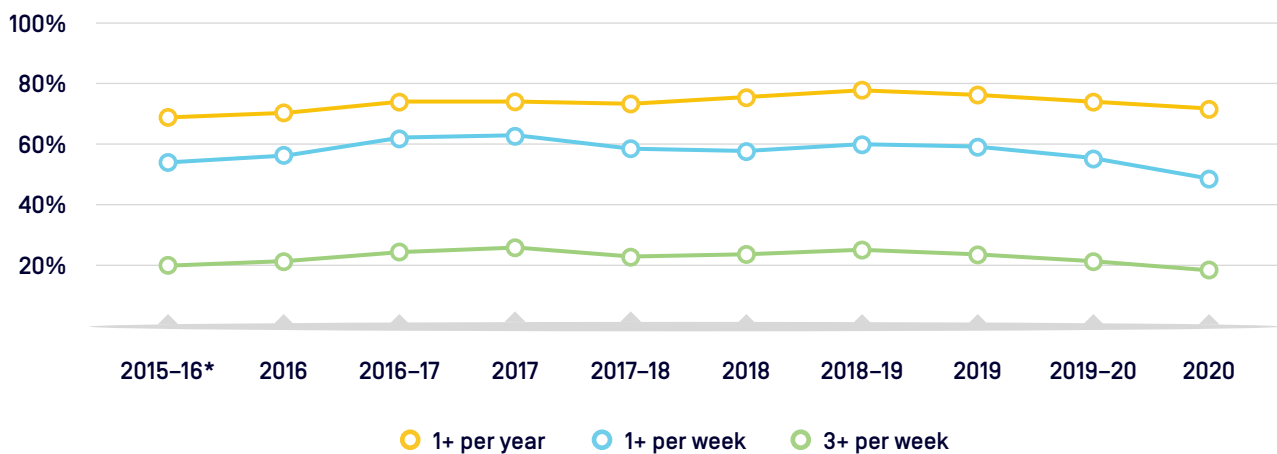
AusPlay reports new data every six months, based on interviews conducted in the preceding calendar or financial year. Therefore, each data point in the charts below has six months of overlapping data, allowing AusPlay to iteratively reveal the impact of COVID-19 on participation trends over time. The most recent AusPlay data indicates signs of an increase in 5+ and 7+ per week participation in sport or physical activity for adults.

ADULT PARTICIPATION RATES OVER TIME BY FREQUENCY



As first reported in October 2020, children's participation was most impacted by COVID-19, largely due to the restrictions placed on organised sport. This impact has started to become more evident in AusPlay's trend data with the most recent six months showing declines in 1+ and 3+ per week participation.

CHILDREN'S ORGANISED OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL PARTICIPATION RATES OVER TIME BY FREQUENCY



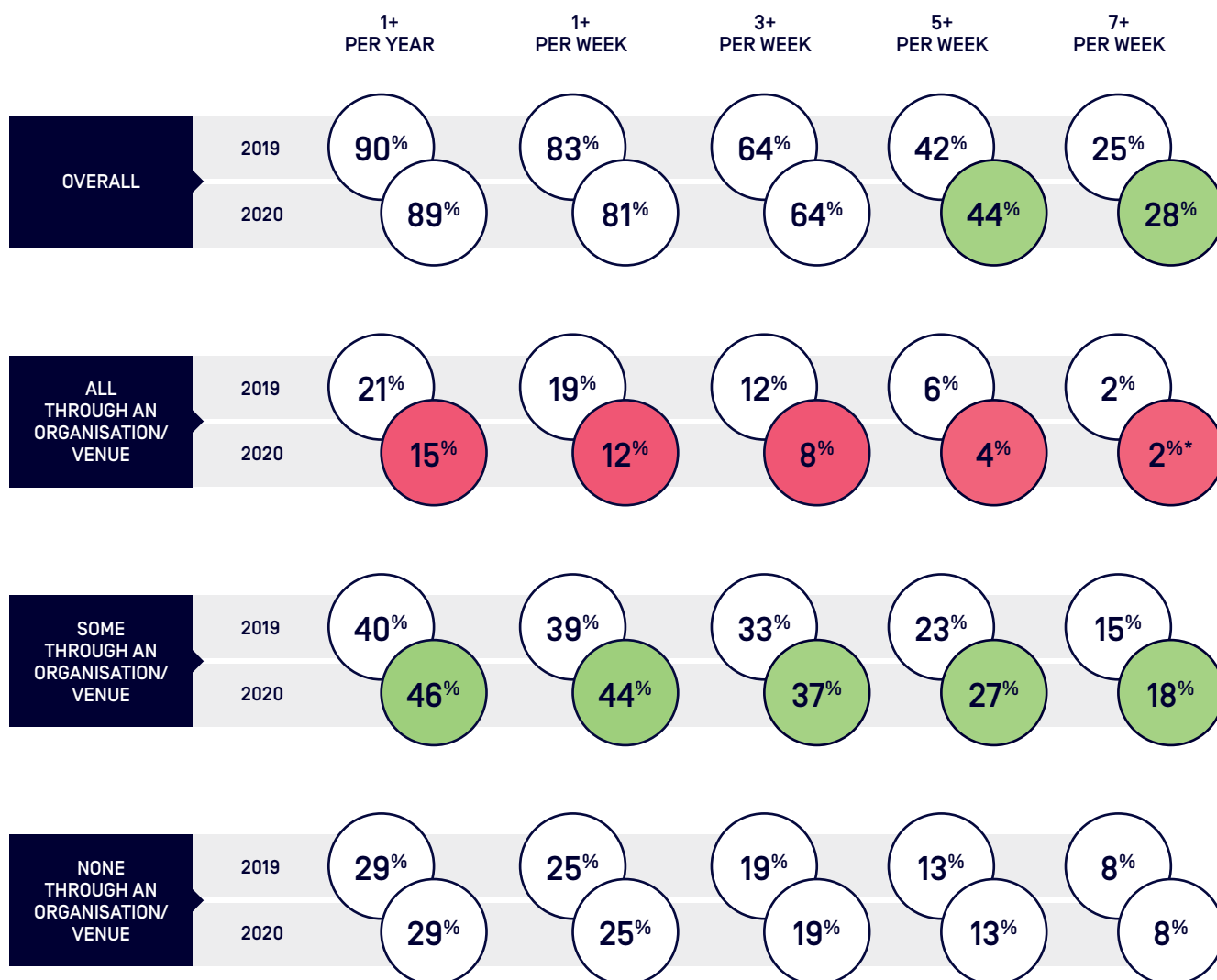
* Not a full financial year as AusPlay commenced on 22 October 2015

The following pages highlight how national participation changed year-on-year across a range of types and frequencies. Figures in green are statistically significant increases from 2019-2020, which align with other findings in this update – in particular the increases in women’s participation, and Australians combining some organised socially distanced sports with non-organised accessible activities in order to keep active in a COVID-19 environment. Figures in red are statistically significant decreases, which reflect the restrictions placed on organised sport.



Similar statistically significant increases in high frequency adult participation were observed in Victoria, and also driven by women.

ADULT PARTICIPATION BY TYPE AND FREQUENCY

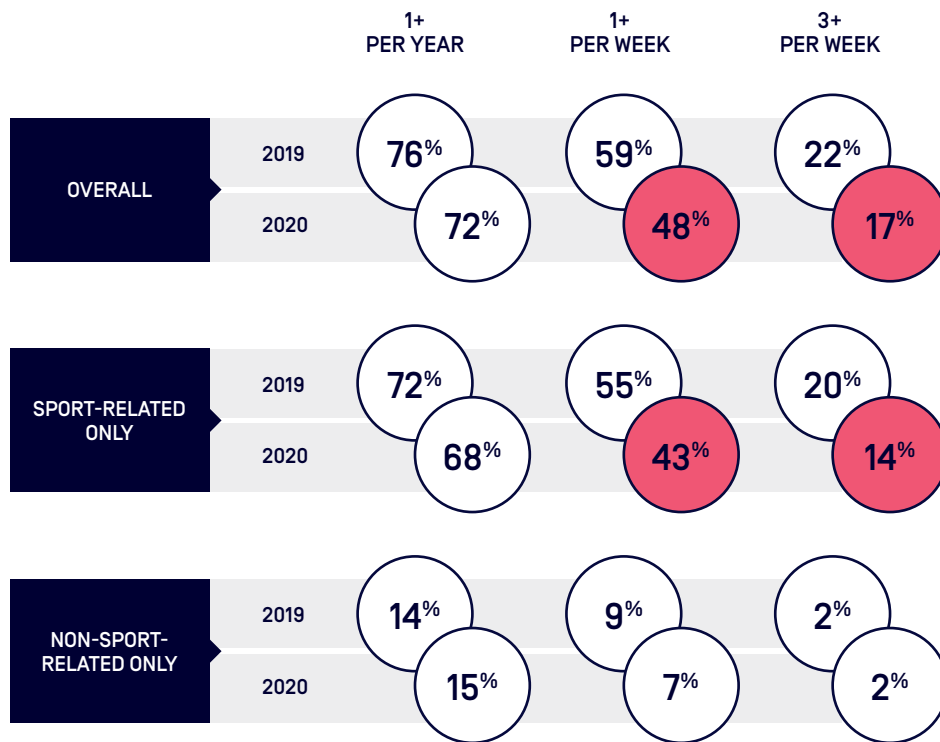


● Statistically significant increase year-on-year ● Statistically significant decrease year-on-year

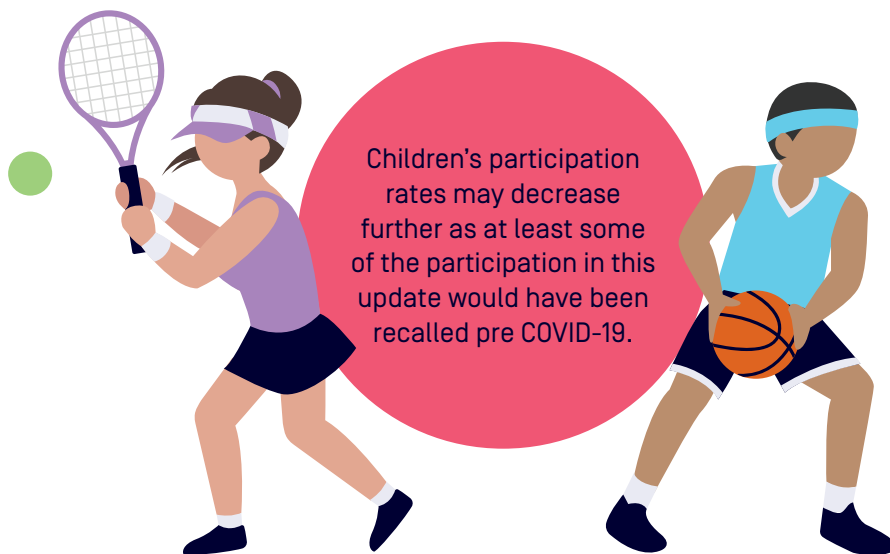
* This statistically significant decrease is not immediately apparent due to rounding. The data to one decimal place is 2.3% [2019] and 1.5% [2020].

The vast majority of children's organised outside of school participation is through club sport, which was restricted during the pandemic. Therefore, the overall organised and sport-related participation rates are already revealing statistically significant declines at frequencies of 1+ and 3+ per week.

CHILDREN'S ORGANISED OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL PARTICIPATION BY TYPE AND FREQUENCY



● Statistically significant decrease year-on-year



What does the future hold?

Sport Australia will continue to provide COVID-19 updates using AusPlay and CPM data. These updates will reveal the impact of the pandemic on Australian participation rates and trends. Some questions that we're seeking to answer include:

- What impact does a return to sport, particularly organised and team sport, have on men's participation?
- When will children's organised participation outside of school reach its lowest point in AusPlay's trend data?
- What does the new 'normal' look like for sport and physical activity participation in Australia?



Whilst these questions remain, what does already appear to be apparent is that COVID-19 has accelerated megatrends observed in evidence almost a decade ago. In 2013, and in collaboration with CSIRO Futures, we identified **six megatrends likely to shape the Australian sport sector over the next 30 years**. One of these megatrends – A Perfect Fit – highlighted the rise of individualised activities, and that people are fitting sport into their increasingly busy and time-fragmented lifestyles to achieve personal health objectives. The acceleration of this megatrend makes sense at a time when personal health is in the spotlight and the only physical activities available during the heights of COVID-19 were individualised, as observed in our October 2020 report and this update.





Australian Government

Australian Sports Commission

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Any further questions about AusPlay
[or queries for additional customised reporting/
further analysis of the dataset] can be directed
to the Insights team at Sport Australia via:

AusPlay@sportaus.gov.au