

October 2023

Since January 2020 when COVID-19 was first confirmed in Australia, AusPlay provided us with a picture of how the pandemic has affected participation in sport and physical activity.

October 2020

We investigated the early impact of the pandemic (using data collected up to June 2020). At that time:

- frequency of participation began to increase, particularly among women aged 15+
- the effect of exercise on mental health was recognised as a more prevalent motivation to be active.



June 2021

We looked at the ongoing impact (using data collected up to December 2020). At that time:

- activities like walking, running and cycling, which could be done outside in a physically-distanced way, became more popular among Australians 15+
- children's organised out-of-school activities were hardest hit.



July 2022

We focused on how participation was adapting to "COVID-normal" (using data collected up to December 2021). At that time:

- the trend for Australians to embrace a greater mix of activity types accelerated
- physically-distanced activities continued to increase in popularity
- "Exergaming" became a top-20 activity as more Australians used technology in their exercise regimes
- children's activities picked up again as restrictions were eased.



October 2023

Now that COVID-19 has moved from a health emergency to an ongoing but manageable part of life, we revisit the findings from previous reports. This summary uses data collected up to June 2023 and takes a final look at:

- which, if any, pandemic-induced habits have remained, and which may have fallen by the wayside
- how far children's activities have recovered
- whether the motivations that became more important while COVID-19 restrictions were in place are still increasing.

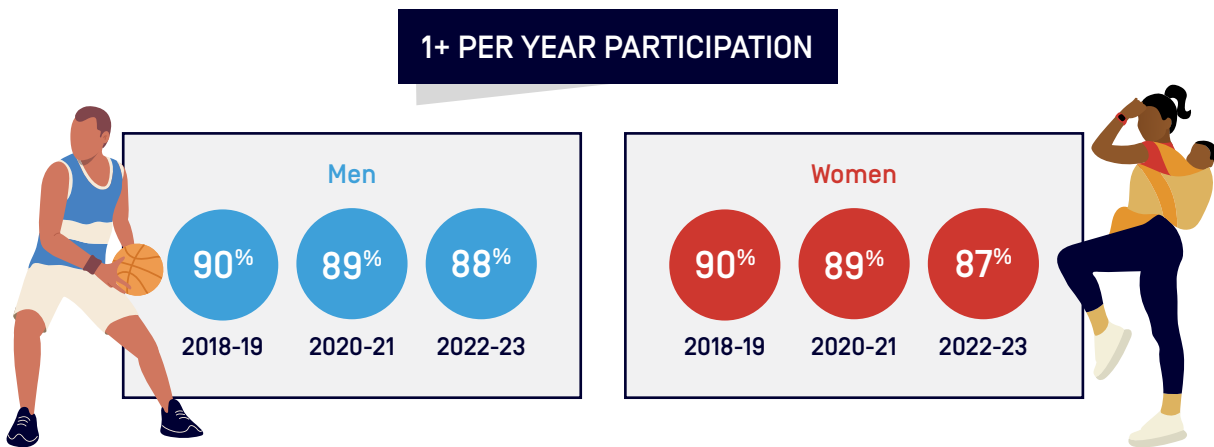
Notes: This report provides a picture of participation before, during and after the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, using data from the 2018-19 to 2022-23 financial years. Where only three data points are shown, 2020-21 is used to represent participation during the pandemic.

Previous COVID-19 reporting has focused on data collected in calendar years (January to December). Data points and some results may therefore not be directly comparable to previous reports.

What's happened with participation frequency?

Adults 15+

Men and women are equally likely to participate in sport or physical activity at least once a year. This was no different during COVID-19 years.

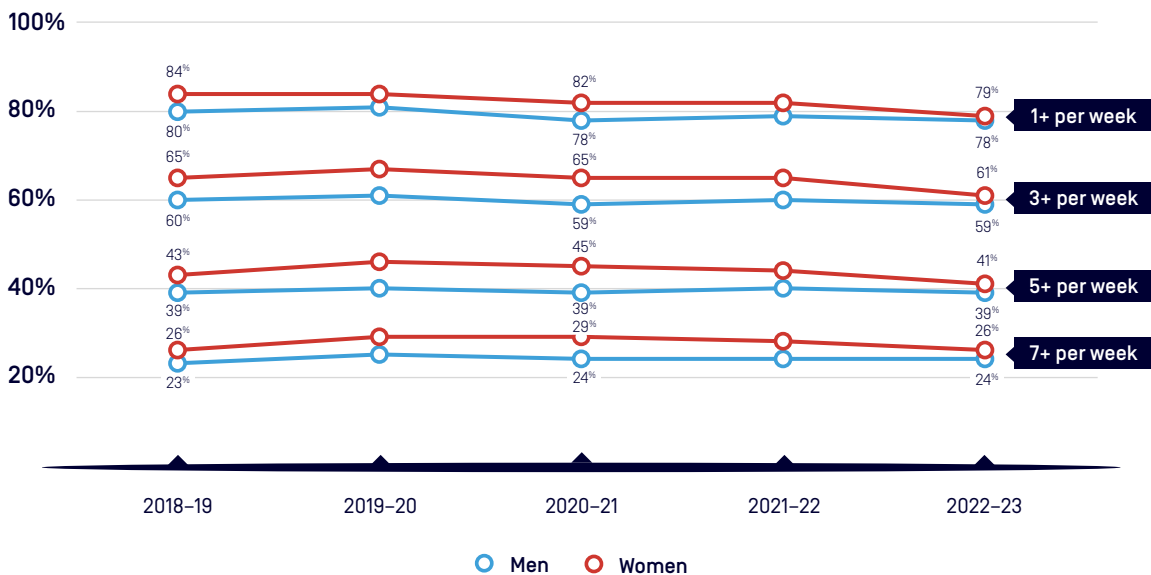


Women's activity behaviour changed the most during COVID-19 but this change has not been sustained.

The differences are found in more regular participation frequencies. Throughout the years of the pandemic, men's participation was relatively stable across all regular frequencies.

Women, on the other hand, increased the frequency of their activity during COVID-19 years but have not maintained these higher levels. In 2022-23, the gap between men and women in all but 1+ per year participation has narrowed, with women's regular participation reaching its lowest levels since AusPlay began.

COMPARING PARTICIPATION FREQUENCIES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

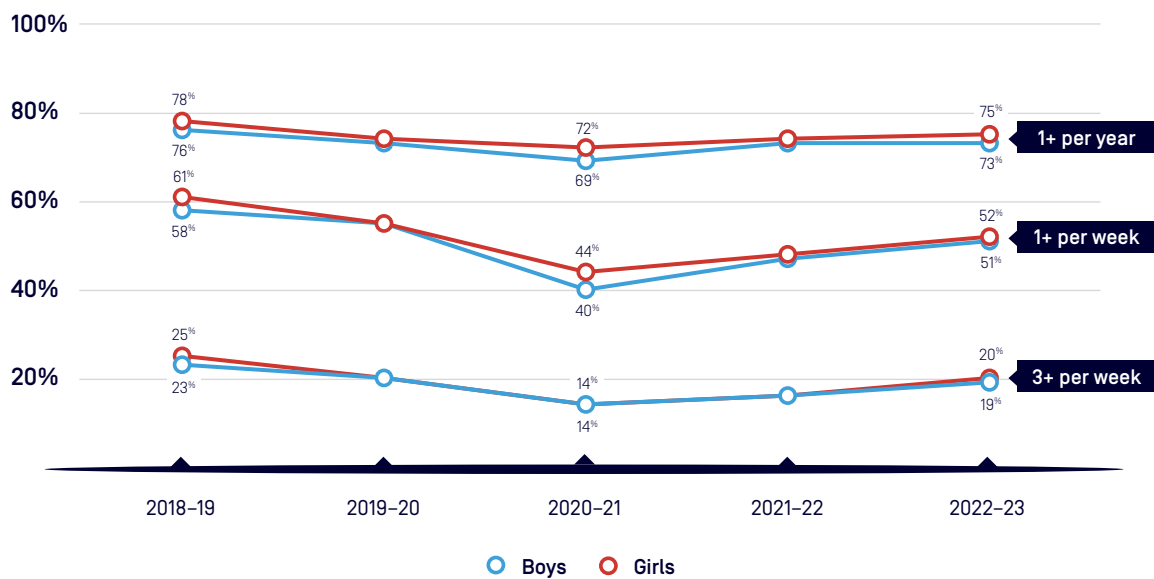


Children 0-14

Children's regular, organised participation in sport and physical activity took a big hit during COVID-19, dropping as low as 42% for 1+ per week participation in 2020-21.

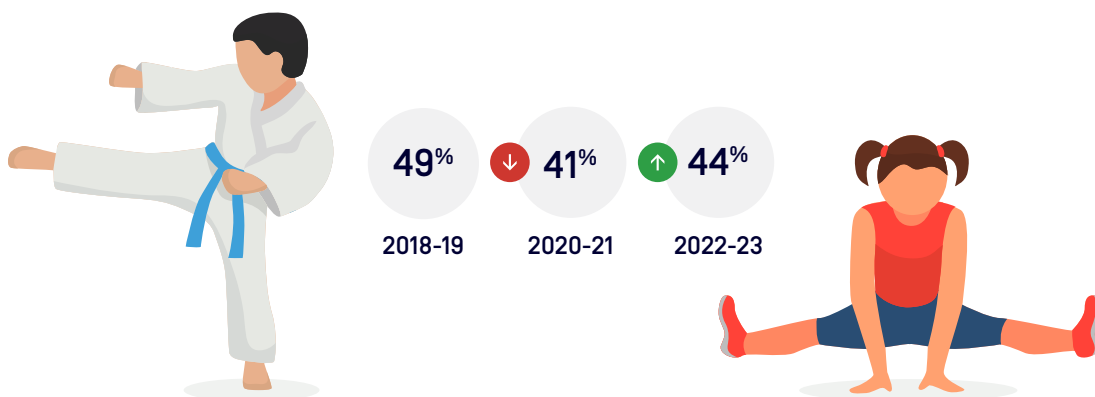
Since then, children have been steadily returning to their organised out-of-school activities, although rates are not yet back to pre-COVID-19 levels. Unlike adults, there were few differences by gender.

COMPARING PARTICIPATION FREQUENCIES BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS



Participation through a sports club or association reflected 1+ per week participation rates, recovering after a low point in 2020-21 but is not yet back to 2018-19 levels.

PARTICIPATION THROUGH A SPORTS CLUB/ASSOCIATION

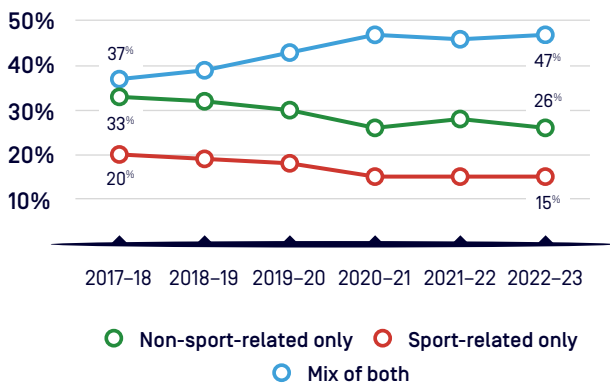


Types of participation

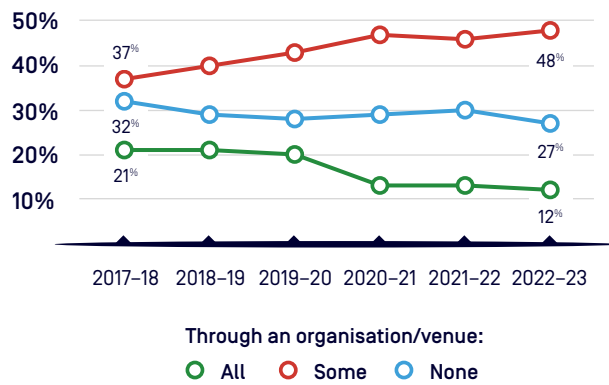
In 2022, we reported that Australians were participating in a greater mix of activities, a trend that was already apparent but seemingly accelerated by COVID-19. This trend appears to have stabilised at the levels reached in 2020-21.

Similarly, we reported in 2022 that Australians were taking an increasingly mixed approach to being active, with more adults 15+ sometimes exercising through organisations/venues and sometimes independently. The latest data shows this trend is continuing, albeit at a slower pace.

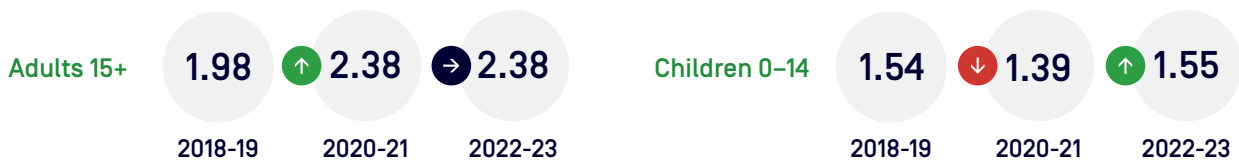
TYPE OF ACTIVITIES PARTICIPATED IN - ADULTS 15+



ORGANISATION/VENUE USE - ADULTS 15+



The average number of activities for adults 15+ also remains higher than in pre-COVID years. For children, the average number of activities has rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.



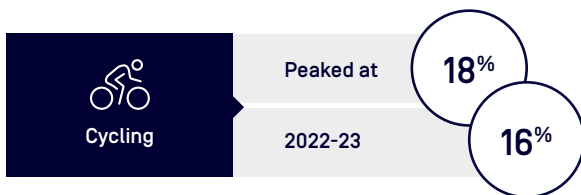
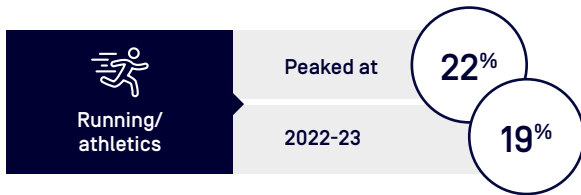
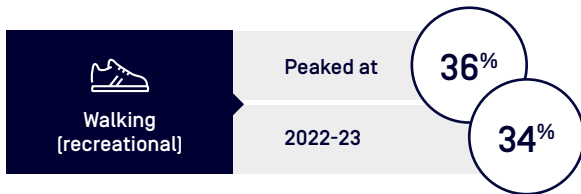
Have activities that were popular during COVID-19 been sustained?

Adults 15+

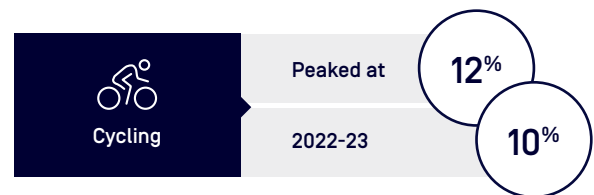
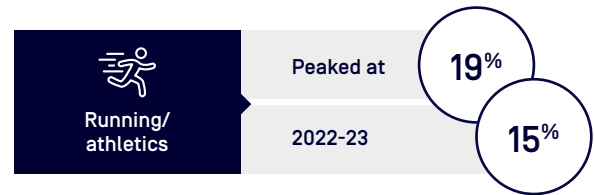
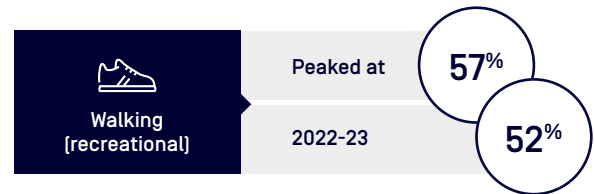
The endurance/health activities that became more popular during COVID-19 have dropped off their peak participation rates (recorded in 2020-21) but still attract more participants than they did in 2018-19.

ACTIVITIES THAT PEAKED DURING COVID-19

Men










Women



Other activities that increased during COVID-19 (mostly those that could be done physically-distanced or remotely) have sustained the higher rates.

ACTIVITIES THAT INCREASED DURING COVID-19 AND HAVE BEEN SUSTAINED

Men 15+	2022-23 participation rate	Additional participants since 2018-19
 Fitness/gym	36%	624,000
 Swimming	16%	295,000
 Bushwalking	8%	312,000
 Golf	9%	311,000
 Football/soccer	9%	193,000
 Basketball	8%	259,000
 Tennis	6%	190,000
 Exergaming*	6%	692,000
 Mountain biking	3%	152,000

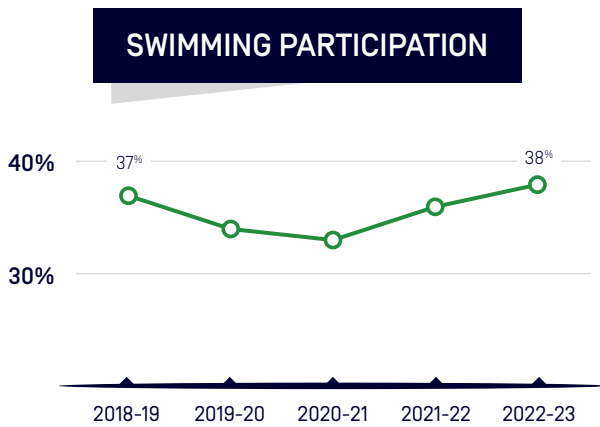
Women 15+	2022-23 participation rate	Additional participants since 2018-19
 Swimming	20%	513,000
 Bushwalking	12%	713,000
 Yoga	11%	281,000
 Pilates	9%	448,000
 Exergaming*	6%	671,000
 Tennis	5%	97,000
 Surfing	2%	155,000

*Virtual/technology-based/gaming exercise, for example, motion sensing console games, smart treadmills, online platforms such as Zwift.



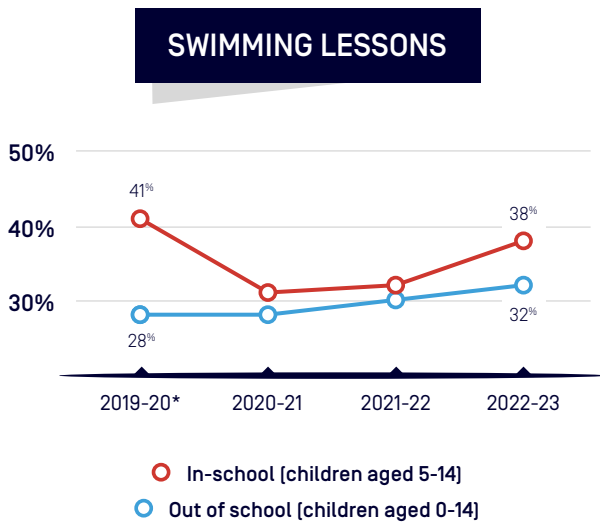
Children 0-14

The most popular activity for children has always been swimming and this is back to pre-pandemic levels.



Out-of-school swimming lessons were maintained when COVID restrictions allowed and continue to increase in popularity.

In 2022 we raised a concern that some children may be missing out on swimming lessons as online learning resulted in schools being unable to offer their swim programs. While in-school lessons are not quite back to 2019-20 levels, they have recovered significantly since 2020-21.



*Data on swimming lessons has only been collected since October 2018.

Participation rates for most other activities are at around the same levels in 2022-23 as they were five years earlier. Gymnastics and Basketball were exceptions, where participation numbers have increased significantly (by 126,000 and 103,000 respectively) over the five year period. Gymnastics also experienced an increase of 122,000 participants since 2021-22.

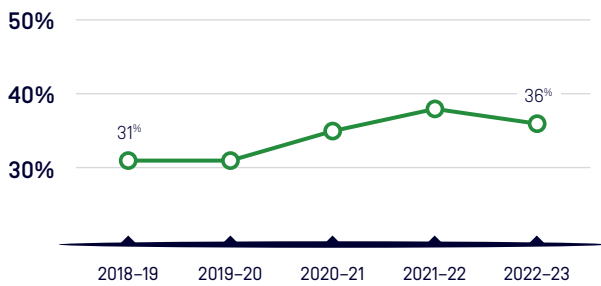


Motivations for getting active

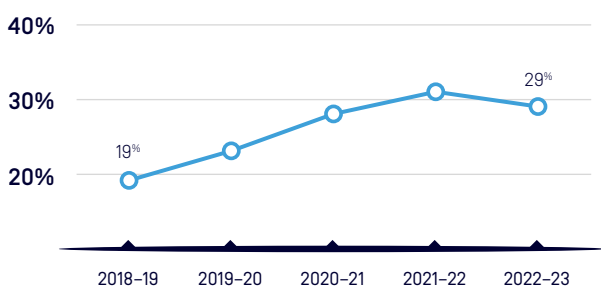
Throughout the pandemic, we noticed an increase in Australians 15+ saying that they participate in sport and physical activity for social reasons, for the effect it has on their mental health, and to be outdoors. Now that COVID-19 is no longer restricting our everyday lives, all of these reasons for exercising have declined in importance, although social and mental health reasons remain higher than in pre-pandemic years.

MOTIVATIONS – ADULTS 15+

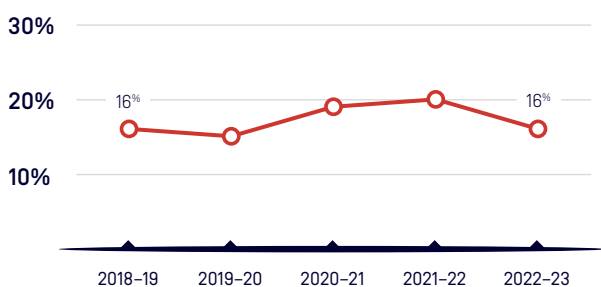
Social reasons



Psychological/mental health/therapy



To be outdoors/enjoy nature



In conclusion

The data suggests that the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic got more Australians aged 15+ active more often, especially in individual outdoor activities or those that lent themselves to physical distancing. At the same time, more Australians recognised the mental health benefits of being active as exercise became one of the few reasons people could leave their homes.

As restrictions eased and life became more normal, some Australians have continued with the broader range of activities they may have started during COVID-19 but are generally doing them less frequently. This is more apparent among women than men. In terms of how people get active, the increased mix of activities and locations looks set to continue.

For children 0-14, COVID-19 reduced the amount of out-of-school organised sport and physical activity they were able to do. While the majority have returned to these activities, overall participation rates are still below the levels AusPlay reported in the pre-pandemic years.

About AusPlay

AusPlay commenced in October 2015 and is the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind ever conducted in Australia. From 2016 to 2022, 20,000 adults aged 15 or over completed the survey each year. 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 (selected randomly if there is more than one child).

While AusPlay collects all physical activity adults have participated in, information for children is only collected on their organised activities outside of school hours. Respondents are asked about their participation in sport and physical activity in the 12 months prior to interview. Interviews are conducted by mobile telephone and were able to continue uninterrupted during COVID-19.

The April to June 2023 quarter had a reduced sample. As a result, the national sample for the July 2022 to June 2023 period was 16,927 and lower than the historical 20,000 per annum.

Full details of the [AusPlay methodology](#) is publicly available on the Clearinghouse for Sport.

More data

The majority of the AusPlay dataset is available via an [online portal](#) for users to conduct their own analysis by year or demographic group. For further information contact the [Insights Team](#) at the Australian Sports Commission.

