

WOMEN WHO WALK

Victoria
walks



Activating spaces for women





Australian women are active walkers (choosing to walk more than men for recreation, and marginally more for transport) but there are barriers that prevent many women from walking as much as they would like to.

So how do we make walking feel safer and more appealing?

Victoria Walks has a simple solution – facilitated social walking events that connect women and encourage them to make greater use of local parks and trails. Streets and spaces populated with women are safer and more appealing.

Victoria Walks has successfully piloted a women’s walking event and now we want to take Women Who Walk to the next level; to create an inspiring movement of women walking together regularly, right across Victoria.

Why women and why walking?

Walking is Australia’s most popular recreational activity, and women make up 62 per cent of the 8.7 million Australians aged over 15 who choose to walk for health and fitness.ⁱ In Victoria however more than half of women aren’t active enough and one in ten women do no activity at all in a typical week.ⁱⁱ

Females participate in sport at half the rate of malesⁱⁱⁱ and they are four times more likely to choose flexible recreational activities compared with club-based sports.^{iv}

Boosting participation in active recreation – getting more women doing the activities many already enjoy – could be an efficient way to boost overall activity levels. Walking at a moderate pace (i.e. 5km p/h) for half an hour a day on most days of the week is enough to meet the physical activity guidelines and realise health benefits.

What are the barriers to women walking more?

Many of our public spaces are failing to meet the needs of women. Of all OECD countries, Australia has the largest gender gap for “feeling safe walking alone at night”. Recent research found that just 15 per cent of young Victorian women feel safe walking at night compared with 54 per cent of young Victorian males.^v This means that for half the population, access to a healthy recreational activity is restricted.

In addition to safety concerns VicHealth research shows two in five women feel embarrassed exercising in public and 52 per cent worry about being judged while exercising.^{vi}

While there’s comfort in numbers, only four per cent of current recreational walking activity is organised.^{vii} Research tells us that while a range of walking programs or interventions exist in Victoria, they have largely failed to engage women who either aren’t aware of the opportunities or feel they are a poor fit for their lifestyle or schedules.

Moreover, many women underestimate how beneficial walking is. Research has shown women’s perceptions about the amount and type of exercise that is meaningful is out of step with the reality. Walking is often not deemed enough in its own right but rather a gateway to more strenuous or “legitimate” activities.^{viii}



Women Who Walk – Princes Park

In 2019, Victoria Walks and the City of Melbourne worked together to address safety concerns of female residents following some highly publicised attacks in parks. They devised the Women Who Walk® event concept to test whether city parks could be more welcoming and accessible for female residents and workers.

The series of hosted social walks at Carlton’s Princes Park ran from late October to mid-December. The events were scheduled in the evening to provide accessibility to both working and non-working women, and those who feared walking alone at night.

Promotional materials emphasised the inclusive, casual nature of the walks. Staff from Victoria Walks and the City of Melbourne provided a friendly, welcoming presence at each event.

Local women were informed of the events via:

- Victoria Walks’ newsletter and social media audience
- City of Melbourne’s digital channels, community networks and partner organisations
- Leafleting in the vicinity of Princes Park by Victoria Walks

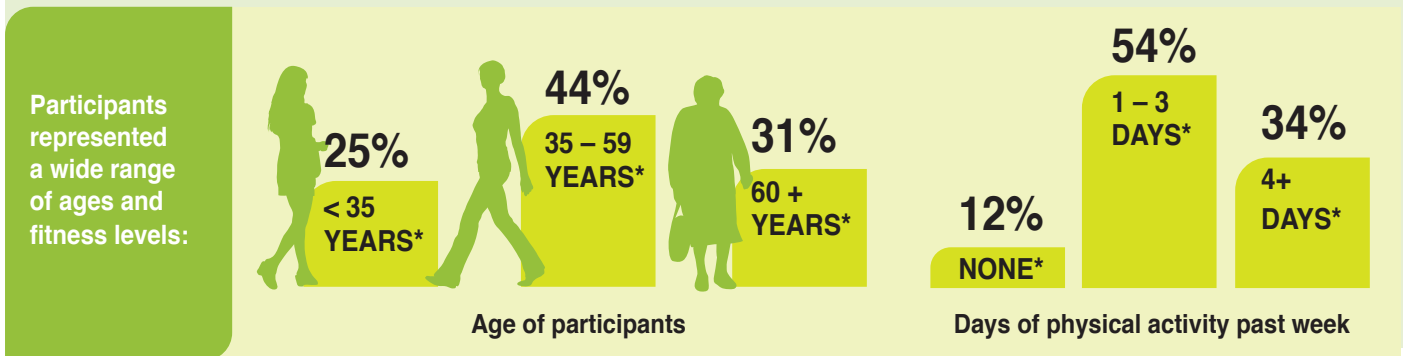
Engaging all types of women

More than 90 women registered their interest and an average of 23 women participated in each event. The walks attracted women who lived or worked in the City of Melbourne or surrounding suburbs, and a small number who travelled from further afield.

While most participants lived or worked within the City of Melbourne nearly half (45 per cent) indicated they had rarely or never visited Princes Park, citing distance, lack of

time/motivation and having no-one to walk with as reasons. Almost one-third nominated “no-one to walk with” as the main reason for not using the park more often.

Among those who visited Princes Park more regularly, the most popular times were between 6am and 9am and between 4pm and 6pm. While 73 per cent of women felt safe walking there during the day, just seven per cent indicated they would feel safe in the park at night.



Evaluation

The evaluation of the Women Who Walk Princes Park pilot was overwhelmingly positive.

Almost half of the participants completed the post-program survey.

Satisfaction was extremely high – 95 per cent of respondents rated the pilot eight or more out of 10.

Importantly, 45 per cent said they were walking for fitness/enjoyment “more often” and 27 per cent began walking in Princes Park outside the scheduled Tuesday evening walks.

Participants particularly commented on the social aspect; 59 per cent indicated they felt more connected to their community.

The few criticisms of the program came from individuals who said the time of the events did not suit their schedule.

At the conclusion of the program, 72 per cent of respondents indicated an increased interest or intent to walk in Princes Park, and 86 per cent indicated an increased interest in walking in other parks. Most (73 per cent) indicated they would be very likely to continue to walk beyond the program.*

Many participants said they would like to see the program replicated at other parks, including at less “busy” parks.

At the final event, 12 women across a range of age groups opted to remain in contact, forming a WhatsApp group so they could continue to meet and walk together.

Reasons why participants did not previously walk regularly in Princes Park:

31%

“no one to walk with”



28%

“too far away”



16%

“lack of time”



16%

“prefer other forms of exercise”



9%

“not motivated to walk”



While most participants lived or worked in the City of Melbourne, 45 per cent indicated they had rarely or never visited Princes Park, citing distance, lack of time/motivation and having no-one to walk with as reasons. Almost one-third nominated “no-one to walk with” as the main reason for not using the park more often.

“Thanks for the walk, it got me motivated. I now walk each day during my lunch hour and do a lap of the park most weeknights.”

* Rating their likelihood of continuing to walk without an organised program as 8, 9 or 10 out of 10.

What we learned

There is merit in facilitating social walking events that encourage women to make greater use of their local parks for recreation and help them form new social connections to continue walking together.

Participants were motivated to attend for the social connection opportunities with other women as much as for health and fitness, confirming that a lack of organised walking opportunities is a barrier to greater participation.

We congratulate City of Melbourne for showing leadership and creativity in this space, and for funding the Princes Park pilot events.



Find out more about running a Women Who Walk® program

Women Who Walk provides a model for a convenient, inclusive, safe and attractive event to connect women. Victoria Walks is keen to develop the concept to reach wider audiences and activate more spaces for communities of women.

Future programs could increase access to parks across Victoria, at different times of the week and year, or to less populated parks or trails, inspiring more women to exercise in public spaces.

Partner organisations best suited to developing Women Who Walk events are those with a commitment to enabling women's greater participation in active recreation.

To inquire about how Victoria Walks can help engage women in your community to walk more, contact us today.

- ⁱ *Walking (Recreational) State of Play*, AusPlay, Sport Australia, April 2019.
- ⁱⁱ *National Health Survey: First Results, 2017-18, Victoria*, ABS. 4364.0.55.001
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Sport Participation Rates – Aggregation of 12 sports – Victoria 2017*, R Eime et al, Victoria University and Federation University 2019.
- ^{iv} *Female participation in sport and physical activity*, VicHealth, August 2015.
- ^v *Young people and walking*, Victoria Walks, 2017.
- ^{vi} *Getting women to sign up for physical activity (a step-by-step guide from This Girl Can – Victoria)*, VicHealth 2020.
- ^{vii} *Walking (Recreational) State of Play*, AusPlay, Sport Australia, April 2019.
- ^{viii} *Women and Walking*, Centre for Sport and Social Impact (La Trobe University), unpublished report for Victoria Walks, 2019.

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The Women Who Walk
Princes Park program was
delivered in partnership
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