

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that physical inactivity increased with age and was a major contributor to obesity and chronic diseases. This study was designed to analyse the level of physical activity among senior citizens in a rural parish and factors contributing to this level of physical activity.

The sample consisted of 147 senior citizens, 119 drawn conveniently from clinic attendees at two health centres and 28 from an institution for the elderly. Focus groups, home visits and observations were also done.

The results showed that 88% of seniors reported having at least one chronic illness, with hypertension and diabetes accounting for 63% of the total. Most seniors (67%) however were able to perform activities of daily living without assistance. The majority of the seniors (75%) interviewed were overweight or obese, with mean BMI for females being $28.58 \pm 8 \text{ kg/m}^2$ and males $26.65 \pm 6 \text{ kg/m}^2$.

Most seniors (68.75%) reported that they were exercising, which included walking, farming, stretching and housework. The frequency, intensity and duration however, were below the minimum levels required for optimum health benefits.

Over 81% thought that exercise was beneficial, but not all were exercising, as exercise was done as a part of daily living and not to reap health benefits. Major free time activities were mainly sedentary, 35% watched television and 24% just

relaxed. The general attitude was that it was time to relax after a lifetime of hard work. Seniors relied heavily on doctors for health advice but 71% had never been advised by a doctor to exercise. Factors impacting on their participation in physical activity were lack of knowledge of the relationship between their illness and physical inactivity, socio-economic and environmental conditions.

Interventions aimed at increasing the level of physical activity among senior citizens should therefore be multisectoral and multifaceted, taking into consideration the barriers to physical activity in this group.