

# The Rural Route to Active Aging:

A Guide for People Who  
Want to Stay Active as They Age



Alberta  
Centre for  
**Active Living**

# The Rural Route to Active Aging: A Guide for People Who Want to Stay Active as They Age



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# The Rural Route to Active Aging: A Guide for People Who Want to Stay Active as They Age

Life in a rural community has many benefits. People tend to have a strong sense of belonging and pride in their community.

The physical environment, the “great outdoors,” shapes the way they live, work and play. The weather is sure to be talked about at the coffee shop. People know their neighbours, help each other get jobs done, share successes and failures, booms and busts.

The list of good things about living in the country is long. However, because of the distance between home, work and many services, rural Albertans spend a lot of time in their vehicles. This is one factor in the high number of rural people living very sedentary lifestyles.

Other factors include access to and availability of services, income, mechanization of farming and other professions, and seeing recreation as unproductive time.



## What's in This Guide for You?

This guide is for adults living in rural areas who are considering being active or who want to stay active as they age. If you know that you need to move more and sit less, this guide is for you.

### Page 4 Why Be Active?

Information on the benefits of an active lifestyle and how much you need to do.

### Page 5 Setting Goals

How to set and meet activity goals.

### Page 7 Getting Going: Preparing to Be Active

Ways to prepare for being active, including tips on footwear and clothing, and ideas for keeping you safe while you're active.

### Page 9 Active Ideas

Practical ideas for physical activity in your rural community. This section focuses on walking and strength training and stretching exercises.

### Page 18 Helping to Make Your Community More Active

Ways to create more support for active lifestyles in your area. This section includes a checklist to take with you as you walk around your community.

### Page 23 Find out More

Helpful links to further information.

### Page 24 References

Sources for the information in this booklet.

## Why Be Active?

### What's in This Section for You?

- ◇ *What do you get from physical activity?*
- ◇ *How much activity do you need?*

### What Do You Get From Physical Activity?

There are so many benefits to regular physical activity. Below are just a few examples.

#### Health benefits:

- Disease prevention and symptom management of heart disease, arthritis, diabetes and cancer.
- Better weight control and reduced blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- Increased bone density, faster injury recovery, improved circulation.
- Improved ability to deal with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

#### Lifestyle benefits:

- More enjoyment, fun, improved social life, less stress, better sex.
- Increased self-esteem, more energy, better sleep.
- Increased ability to enjoy retirement and life in general.

#### Fitness benefits:

- Increases in muscular strength, balance, co-ordination, muscular and cardiovascular endurance.

Now ask yourself what benefits you would like to gain from physical activity. What's important to you? Write down these benefits on a piece of paper or the memo board on your fridge. Put your note in a place where you will see it everyday!

### How Much Activity Do You Need?

What is the bare minimum you need to do?

- **For health benefits.** Thirty minutes a day of moderate activity will help prevent and control symptoms associated with disease.
- **For fitness benefits.** Thirty to 60 minutes a day of moderate activity will increase your ability to move through your day easily. An increased level of fitness equals increased long-term independence.

Working at a moderate intensity means that you will be sweating, your heart rate will increase and you will breathe more quickly, but you can still speak.



## Setting Goals

Now that you know that regular physical activity is essential for healthy, happy aging, here are some steps for setting inspiring goals. Going through these steps will help you come up with a successful activity plan.

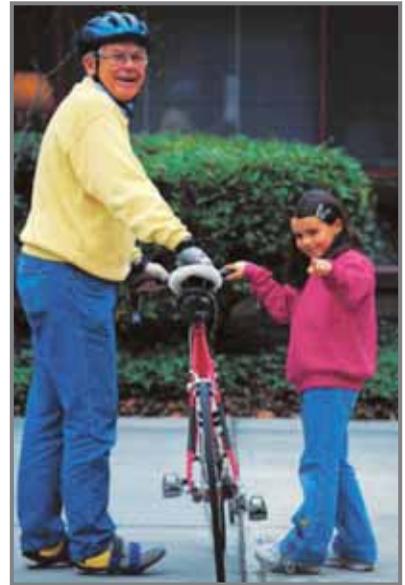
### What's in This Section for You?

- ◇ *Setting your long-term goals*
- ◇ *Setting realistic daily or weekly goals*

### Setting Your Long-Term Goals

What do you want to get from regular physical activity? Improved health? Ability to play a sport longer? Relaxation? Stronger legs? Fun with a friend? Recovery from a health scare?

Now think about the physical activities, both in daily living and in recreation, that can give you what you want. Write down the larger reasons you are choosing to be active. These are your long-term goals. These are your priorities. Post them where you will see them everyday.



Active living is a way of life in which physical activity is valued and made part of daily living. Walk when you can, stretch when you sit and do a simple strength exercise when you're standing in line. Make activity part of your day.

Remember: You've got to start somewhere. Even 10 minutes of activity three times a day is better than nothing. There are 1,440 minutes in every day. Take 30 of them to be active.

### Setting Realistic Daily or Weekly Goals

#### Make Them Doable

Small daily or weekly goals will lead you, one step at a time, to your long-term goals. Learn to set more modest, achievable targets first. You want the goal to require effort but to be within reach. Achieving short-term goals will keep you motivated as you work toward your long-term goals.

#### Focus on the Doing

Clearly spell out what you will do, and where, when and how. Choose something to track that will prove you have met your goal. An example would be, "I will walk to the mailbox on Monday, Wednesday and Friday this week." Success depends on the fact that you did the activity not on how well you did it.

## Give Yourself a Time Limit

Put an end point on your goal that gives you a clear target to work toward. It's harder to know if you have reached your goal without a definite time frame. A weekly goal may give you many chances to celebrate success and eventually reach your larger long-term goal. Reaching your weekly goal can help to build your motivation.

## Make Your Activities Convenient

There's a wide range of activities available. Some of these activities are less structured and some more structured. Activities that require less equipment, less money and less commuting may be the easiest for you to do.

Keep your activities close to home or work whenever you can — you'll be more likely to do them.

## Make Activity Regular, yet Flexible

To maintain regular physical activity, busy people may prefer flexible scheduling. Plan activity into your day as you would an appointment. Choose a few convenient times (e.g., during lunch, right after work). Do something during one of those times every day. Have a plan to replace your missed sessions.

## Examples of Goals

**Weekly:** “I will walk to check two miles of fence line each day for the next two weeks.”

“I will meet Rita at 2 p.m. to swim for 30 minutes on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays for the next four weeks.”

**Long Term:** “I want to be able to enjoy playing with my grandchildren and to improve my golf game.”

“I want to be strong enough to live on the farm for the next 15 years and then enjoy my retirement.”

Now write your weekly goal and long-term goals on a piece of paper and post them where you will see them everyday.

### Are You on the Internet?

The Alberta Centre for Active Living, *Activity Tracker* can help you set goals and keep track of your daily and weekly activity online.

Check it out at [www.centre4activeliving.ca/older-adults/trackerlogin.html](http://www.centre4activeliving.ca/older-adults/trackerlogin.html).

## Getting Going: Preparing to Be Active

This section gives you ways to prepare for being active, including tips on footwear and clothing. The information at the end of this section will help keep you safe while you're active.

### What's in This Section for You?

- ◇ *Before you get moving*
- ◇ *Being safe while you're active*

### Before You Get Moving

#### Footwear

Make sure you have a comfortable pair of shoes to prevent blisters or injury.

A good pair of walking shoes will have:

- enough room to wiggle your toes
- nylon mesh or leather to allow your feet to breathe
- firm arch support
- support around the heel to prevent sliding
- a flexible sole that bends where your foot bends



#### Shoe Shopping Tip

Shop for walking shoes at the end of the day when your feet are larger. Try on both shoes and walk around the store before you buy them to make sure they fit well. To make putting on your shoes easier, use a long-handled shoe horn.

- a slightly elevated heel

In the winter, you may want to wear warmer boots for your outdoor walks. Follow the tips in the footwear list above to make sure that your winter boots fit you properly.

Shoe grips are a great thing to wear when walking on icy paths or roads. There are two different styles — one for better traction on ice and one for snow.

Shoe grips fit on to the bottom of your shoes or boots and come in different sizes depending on your shoe size. They usually sell for about \$30. Ask at your local sporting goods or department store, go online or stop at the store next time you are in the city.



## Making Your Own Shoe Grips

Try making your own shoe grips using small screws or nails. Remember not to wear these shoes inside and that is a permanent solution. These altered shoes will forever be your outdoor winter walking shoes.

## Clothing

- Wear loose, comfortable clothing made of cotton, wool or breathable nylon.
- Choose cotton or wool socks to allow your feet to breathe.
- In warm months, wear loose, lightweight clothing and wear a hat.
- In colder months, layer your clothing so the layers can be easily removed as your body gets warmer. Keep your ears, head and fingers covered to avoid frostbite.

**Resist the urge** to “winterize” your body. Don’t be a bear and hibernate this winter. Bundle up and move! The hot chocolate will be so much more rewarding.

## Being Safe While You’re Active

- If you feel pain, dizziness or light-headedness, stop walking immediately. Sit and rest until symptoms pass. Contact your doctor before your next walk.
- Drink water before and after your walk. Carry a water bottle with you.
- If you are out on the trails or road when it is dark or at dusk or dawn, wear a reflective safety vest or strips. Consider walking with a buddy and carrying a flashlight or headlamp after dark.
- If you’re on the side of a road, be sure to walk against the flow of traffic so you can see vehicles coming.
- Carry personal identification and your cell phone if you have one.
- Wear sunscreen on uncovered skin (even during the winter months). In the summer, protect yourself from insects by wearing long sleeves and mosquito repellent.
- Stay alert! Be aware of your surroundings. If you’re wearing earphones, be sure you can still hear the traffic.
- Avoid using hand, wrist and ankle weights while walking — they increase your risk of injury.
- Carry a whistle in your pocket.
- If you’re going out on a trail or road for a long walk, tell someone about your route or leave a note.
- In icy conditions, use grippers on your shoes and your walking poles.
- Work at your own pace. Start off slowly and increase the intensity as your activity becomes easier.

## Active Ideas

The following activities can be done inside or outside, all year long and with little or no equipment.

These suggestions will help you get started. You may want to go on to more difficult exercises as these become too easy.

### What's in This Section for You?

- ◇ **1. Walking (including using a pedometer)**
- ◇ **2. Strength-training exercises**
- ◇ **3. Stretching exercises**

## 1. Walking

### Benefits

Nature enthusiasts, birdwatchers and snowshoers know the pleasures of walking. Walking can also improve your fitness, health and mental well-being in many ways:

- Walking refreshes the mind, reduces fatigue and increases energy.
- More than half of the body's muscles are designed for walking. It's a natural movement that is virtually injury-free.
- Walking can offer you an enjoyable time for sharing and socializing with friends or family.
- Regular, brisk walking can reduce cholesterol and blood pressure and improve digestion and reduce constipation.
- Walking relieves stress and tension.
- When combined with healthy eating, walking will help you maintain a healthy weight and to feel good about your body.
- Brisk walking is an aerobic activity. It increases the body's demand for oxygen and trains your heart, lungs and muscles to work better.



## Where to Walk

Outside: Walk with the dog, on a trail, down the road to the neighbours and back, during lunch break, to work if you're in town, to check the cows, while doing errands or going to a friend's for coffee. You could also strap on your snowshoes and explore.

Inside: Walk at the gym or track at the local school, the strip mall or around the indoor hockey rink. You could also take the clothes off the treadmill and turn on the television (get your walking workout and watch the hockey game at the same time).

## How Much Do I Need to Do?

If weight loss is your goal, aim for 30 to 60 minutes of continuous walking or wheeling at a moderate pace, four or five times each week. Distance and regularity are the keys to burning calories.

## Walking Tips

1. Warm up with five minutes of medium-paced walking.
2. Stride in your own style. Your body will automatically pick the most effective stride for any given speed.
3. Breathe normally and let your arms swing naturally across your body.
4. Keep your back straight and stomach pulled in with your shoulders down and relaxed.
5. Take long, easy strides. For proper form, step heel-to-toe to lessen joint strain.
6. Breathe normally.
7. Walk briskly at a pace you can maintain comfortably during your walk. Slow down if you can't talk. Stop if you feel dizziness, pain or shortness of breath.
8. Cool down with five minutes of medium to slow walking.
9. Finish with some stretches to prevent stiffness and increase your flexibility.

## Using a Pedometer

Why use a pedometer? A pedometer is good for tracking your walking activity and as a way to motivate you to keep going. You can compare your step count with another pedometer wearing friend and use it to reward yourselves when you reach your goals.

- What is a pedometer? A pedometer is a simple device used to measure the number of steps you take in a day.
- How does a pedometer work? When positioned correctly, your pedometer records a step each time your hip moves up and down. Your pedometer also measures things you do during your day in addition to walking, e.g., bending to tie your shoes.
- How do I wear it? Attach the pedometer to your belt or waistband near the front of your hipbone, in line with your kneecap.

- Use this test to see if you're wearing the pedometer in a place that works well:
  - Clip the pedometer where you want it.
  - Set it to zero.
  - Without looking at the pedometer display, walk 20 steps.
  - Check the pedometer reading to see how many steps it recorded compared to the number of steps you actually took.
  - Wear your pedometer in the spot that gives you the most reliable results. As your body changes, you may need to do the 20-step count test every now and then to make sure that you're still getting accurate results.
- Have you heard of 10,000 steps a day? That is a goal to work towards. You will start to see health and fitness benefits with 10,000 steps a day.



### **Using Walking Sticks (Nordic Walking)**

The walking stick is back, and it's not your grandfather's old cane. Nordic walking has popularized the use of poles while walking.

Walking sticks or poles are great to use for many reasons. They combine the aerobic and strength-building benefits of cross-country skiing with walking.

This full-body, cardio-muscular exercise engages the arms, back, stomach and legs. Using walking poles promotes circulation, corrects breathing, burns more calories than walking by itself and develops total body co-ordination and improved posture.

You can buy Nordic walking poles from most sporting goods stores. You can also use old ski poles, broom handles or even two big sticks.



## 2. Strength-Training Exercises

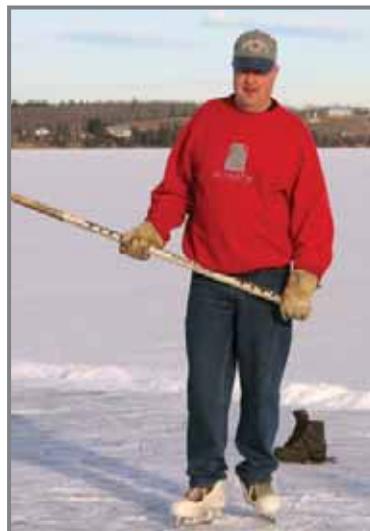
Walking is not enough. It is very important that you do activities to maintain your muscular strength.

Active living activities such as carrying groceries, cutting grass with a push mower, hauling wood or shovelling all help.

The benefits of strength-training exercises include:

- increased muscular strength
- improved muscle tone
- better metabolism for weight control
- more energy
- increased ability to do all sorts of activities
- longer independence
- faster recovery from surgery
- reduced risk of injury

The strength-training exercises shown in this section can be done anywhere, inside or outside, and do not require any equipment.



### Safety Tips

While doing these exercises, remember to breathe through all the movements and work at your own pace. These exercises are all done in a slow and controlled way and should not be painful.

Before each exercise, stabilize your “core” by contracting your stomach muscles (abdominals). This will increase the benefit of the exercise and enable you to do it more easily.

## Wall Push-Up

This exercise will increase your upper body strength (arms, chest and back muscles).

- Find a clear area next to a wall.
- Facing the wall, place your hands on the wall about shoulder-width apart and shoulder height.
- Contract your stomach muscles (abdominals), bend your elbows and lower your face to the wall.
- Straighten your arms slowly and return to the starting position. Keep your elbows “soft,” not locked.
- Keep breathing easily.
- Begin with five repetitions. Increase the number of wall push-ups you do each time until you can do 15.

If you find this movement easy and would like a challenge, change the exercise by doing one or more of the following:

- Two more sets of 15 with a 30-second rest in between each one.
- Move your feet a little farther back from the wall.
- Do the push-up on an incline, using the second railing of a plank fence or the edge of a counter top.



## Chest Press

This exercise will increase the strength and flexibility in your back and chest muscles. You can do it while sitting down if you need to.

- Stand with your shoulders back and down, feet shoulder-width apart, looking straight ahead.
- Raise your arms out to the side to shoulder height, and bend your elbows to 90 degrees.
- Bring your arms together in front of your face. Try to have your elbows and fists meet. Keep your fists over your elbows at all times. If you can't bring your elbows together, only go as far as you are able.
- Repeat this movement 10 to 15 times.
- Relax for 30 seconds and repeat.





### Leg Extension

This exercise will improve your upper leg strength.

- Sit in a chair with a straight back.
- Only your toes and the balls of your feet should be resting on the floor. If you need to raise your knees, form a roll with a bath towel and place it under your knees.
- Rest your hands on your knees or the sides of the chair. Contract your abdominals.
- Slowly extend one leg to straighten your knee as much as possible. Point your toes forward.
- Slowly lower your leg back to the floor.
- Repeat this movement 10 to 15 times on each leg.
- Relax for 30 seconds and repeat.



### Sit to Stand

This exercise will improve your lower body strength, both front and back, and your balance.

- Sit in a firm chair with arms. Make sure the chair is stable and will not slide away from you.
- Sitting in the middle of the chair, feet planted shoulder-width apart, contract your stomach muscles and use your arms and legs to rise to a standing position.
- Lower yourself back slowly into the chair. Remember: The more slowly and deliberately you do the exercise, the harder your muscles will work.
- Repeat this movement five times, increasing up to 15 as you are able.
- Relax for 30 seconds and repeat.
- Once this movement becomes easy, do the exercise without using your arms to help you to the standing position.



## Heel Raise

This exercise will improve your lower body strength, balance and ability to walk.

- Begin by standing on both feet. Hold gently on to a solid object for balance.
- Rise up as high as you can on to your toes, lifting your heels off the floor.
- Lower yourself with control.
- Repeat this motion 15 times.
- Relax and repeat.

If you find this exercise too easy, you can do the same exercise while standing on one foot:

- Be sure to hold gently on to a solid object for balance.
- Rise up as high as you can on to the toes of one foot.
- Lower yourself with control.
- Repeat this motion five times.
- Remember to exercise the other side too!

Every day, increase the number of repetitions until you reach 15.



## 3. Stretching Exercises

Warm up and cool down with five minutes of medium-paced walking, followed by some stretches. This will prevent stiffness, increase your flexibility and help prevent injury.

You want to stretch warm muscles, so it is best to do these exercises after you have warmed up and again after your walk.

### Safety Tips

- Do not bounce while you are in a stretch. Ease into the stretch and hold the position.
- Stretch a muscle to the point that you feel some tension. The stretch shouldn't be painful.
- Continue breathing throughout.
- Use slow and controlled movement.





### Calf Muscles Stretch

- Stand facing a wall.
- Place one foot close to the wall and the second foot out far behind you.
- Place both heels on the floor, bend your front leg slightly and straighten your back leg.
- Stretch your arms forward, and hold on gently to the wall.
- Lean forward until you feel a slight stretch in the back of your extended leg.
- Hold for 15 to 30 seconds.
- Relax back to your starting position and repeat. Be sure to do this stretch twice on both legs.



### Thigh Stretch (Sitting)

- Sit on the edge of a sturdy chair with arms.
- Lower one knee toward the floor and press it back under the chair. Lean back slightly.
- Hold the stretch for 15 to 20 seconds.
- Repeat with each leg twice.



### Alternate Thigh Muscles Stretch (Standing)

- Stand close to a wall or a stable chair.
- Place one hand on the wall.
- Bend one knee and bring your heel toward your bottom.
- With your free hand, reach back and grab the ankle of your bent leg. (Be sure to use the same side foot and hand. For example, if your left leg is bent, you should reach for it with your left hand.)
- Hold for 15 to 30 seconds.
- Relax back to your starting position.
- Repeat twice more with alternate legs.

### Achilles Stretch

- Sit on a chair.
- Plant one heel on the floor.
- Gently lift your toes up and back as far as you can.
- Hold for a count of five.
- Relax and repeat with each foot twice.



### Upper Back and Arm Stretch

- Reach up with both arms, interlacing your fingers with your palms upward.
- Reach as high as you can, keeping your back and neck straight.
- Hold for 20 to 30 seconds.
- Relax and repeat.



### Chest Stretch

- Clasp your hands behind your back (keep a straight back and do not arch your back).
- Breathe out as you raise your arms slowly away from your back as far as is comfortable. This is a very small movement.
- Hold this stretch for 20 to 30 seconds.
- Breathe evenly throughout the hold.
- Relax and repeat the stretch.



### Seated Forward Bend (Hamstring Stretch)

- Sit on a chair.
- Put one leg up on to another chair or bench.
- Lean forward, bending at the hips (not the waist) until you feel a stretch in the back of your upper leg. You may not have to lean very far.
- Hold this stretch for 15 to 30 seconds.
- Relax and repeat with each leg twice.







## 5. Was it easy to follow safety rules?

Could you ...

- Cross at crosswalks or where you could see and be seen by drivers? yes  no
- Stop and look left, right and then left again before crossing streets? yes  no
- Walk on shoulders facing traffic where there were no sidewalks? yes  no
- Cross with the light? yes  no

Something else? \_\_\_\_\_

Location of problems: \_\_\_\_\_

## 6. Was your walk pleasant?

### Problems?

- Needed more grass, flowers or trees yes  no
- Scary dogs, animals, wildlife yes  no
- Not well lighted yes  no
- Trail or path too overgrown yes  no
- Trail to path blocked with fallen trees yes  no
- Dirty, lots of litter or trash yes  no
- Dirty air due to automobile exhaust yes  no

Something else? \_\_\_\_\_

Location of problems: \_\_\_\_\_

## How does your community stack up?

Overall, how would you describe your community's walkability? Put a checkmark beside one of the choices below.

- Excellent**  
Celebrate! You have a great community for walking.
- Good**  
Celebrate a little. Your community is pretty good, but still needs work.
- Some Problems**  
Your community needs lots of work. You deserve better.
- Awful**  
Your community is a disaster for walking!

This checklist is adapted from the National Center for Safe Routes to School, Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center, U.S. Department of Transportation, and United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Walkability Checklist* ([www.walkinginfo.org/pdf/walkingchecklist.pdf](http://www.walkinginfo.org/pdf/walkingchecklist.pdf)).

## Ways to Improve Your Community

Do you want to live in a community that enables you to be more active? Speak out. Let decision-makers know that this is important to you. Let's start changing the attitudes of drivers and developers.

Here are a few tips on how to work for a supportive community:

- Write your city or town council to let them know that the issue is important to you.
- Submit articles to the local paper.
- Ask your neighbours if they would walk more or be more physically active if there were better options.
- Organize a walking group. Meet at the community hall or at the start of a good trail.
- Collaborate with the local school to share space for recreation or even inter-generational physical activity programs.
- Map routes in your area. Find out the distance between your house and the next farm, corner store or golf course.
- Sponsor a community beautification, garbage pick-up, or tree-planting day.
- Work for more active routes or trails to key community locations, e.g., stores and services, schools, around a pond or lake, to the recreation centre or the local campground. A good trail will be used by the whole community for walking, running, biking and more.
- Push for crosswalks, traffic calming ideas and paths to all locations in town.

## Community Contact List

Use this space to note physical activity contacts in your community.

Organization or Person's Name	Tel. number	E-mail	Program/Service Offered

## Find out More

This section gives you some useful resources and links for finding out more about physical activity.

- Alberta Centre for Active Living, *Activity Tracker* ([www.centre4activeliving.ca/older-adults/trackerlogin.html](http://www.centre4activeliving.ca/older-adults/trackerlogin.html)): Help you set goals and keep track of your daily and weekly activity online.
- Alberta Senior Citizens Sport and Recreation Association ([www.alberta55plus.ca](http://www.alberta55plus.ca)): Promotes sport and recreation development for seniors (55+) across the province, acts as the provincial voice of seniors in the Alberta Seniors' Games and works to promote future Alberta Seniors' Games.
- Alberta Trailnet ([www.albertatrailnet.com](http://www.albertatrailnet.com)): Promotes a trail network, including the Trans Canada Trail, to connect all Albertans.
- Government of Nunavut, *Nunavut's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living* ([www.gov.nu.ca/cley/home/english/pdf/npageng.pdf](http://www.gov.nu.ca/cley/home/english/pdf/npageng.pdf)): A guide to physical activity for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.
- ParticipACTION ([www.participaction.com](http://www.participaction.com)): Provides leadership in collaboration and communication to foster the “movement” that inspires and supports Canadians to move more.
- Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center ([www.walkinginfo.org](http://www.walkinginfo.org)): Works to improve the quality of life in communities by increasing safe walking and bicycling.
- Public Health Agency of Canada, *Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living for Older Adults* ([www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/older](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/older)): Information about how much activity you need to stay healthy.
- Volkssport Association of Alberta ([www.albertavolkssport.ca](http://www.albertavolkssport.ca)): The Volkssport Association of Alberta promotes physical fitness and good health for all Albertans.



## References

The following resources were helpful in preparing this booklet.

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# The Rural Route to Active Aging:

A Guide for People Who Want to Stay Active as They Age

This guide offers practical tips and basic exercises (for all abilities) to help you take advantage of physical activity opportunities in your community. Enjoy healthy, active aging in the country. Be active, your way, everyday.



Research and education for the promotion of physical activity

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