

Active Body Active Brain pilot – summary report

Background

Heart Foundation Walking (HFW) is Australia’s largest national network of free community-based walking groups led by volunteer Walk Organisers. In June 2012, HFW joined in partnership with ACH Group, a leading provider of specialist services for older people and those with dementia, and received funding from Alzheimer’s Australia’s National Quality Dementia Care Initiative. The Active Body Active Brain pilot project commenced and was completed 18 months later in December 2013.

The goal of the project was to improve access to, and the uptake of, HFW groups for people with dementia and their carers. It was also important to promote the simplicity of walking as a non-pharmacological intervention for improving the behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia.



National sponsors



State sponsor



Local supporter





What we did

- Formative online survey and focus groups
- Resource development in consultation with project advisory group
- Pilot period (10–12 weeks of walking) with 15 walking groups. Participants completed pre- and post-Quality of Life – Alzheimer’s Disease (QOL-AD) evaluation tool¹
- Statistical analysis
- Selected face-to-face post-walk focus groups
- Post-pilot online survey for organisations involved
- Offered as professional development during a forum for HFW participants in South Australia
- Embedded the new resources and concept into the standard HFW program

Resources developed

- Dementia tips and tools
- Wallet cards
- Magnetic walk reminder whiteboard
- Pictorial route markers
- Promotional templates
- Dementia-specific infographic
- Dementia online training module
- A short promotional video





"You stop thinking about things when you walk. You're usually talking, so it takes that stuff away."

Walker with dementia

People with dementia who participated in the pilot walking groups experienced an improved quality of life overall through involvement in walking, with significant enhancements in family relationships and sleep.

Results

The pilot was evaluated using the QOL-AD tool. Some of the highlights are discussed below.

Walking is an extremely appropriate activity for people with dementia. The increase in physical activity and the social interaction provided by walking in groups is highly beneficial.

"The social and physical improvements for people with dementia are well and truly worth the effort and expense."

HFW volunteer Walk Organiser

"We love it."

"I love getting out in the fresh air."

"We can have a coffee."

Walkers with dementia

Family carers noted improvements in quality of life for their relatives with dementia, particularly noting decreases in agitation and aggression.

"His mood is better if he's been out and about. He feels like he's done something. If he's home he's not sure what to do and gets irritable."

Family carer, discussing a family member with dementia

While nothing can cure dementia, walking in a group provides a positive, cost-effective intervention. Physical activity such as walking can reduce some symptoms of dementia and improves the quality of life and the relationships people have with family, friends and service providers.

Being connected to an HFW group helped people with dementia feel part of their wider community. Key benefits included having company, getting outside and moving around rather than sitting.

“Walking is really something special. Sometimes you meet other people who are walking around and you start talking – it’s great.”

Walker with dementia

The program was more successful at involving people with dementia living in residential care facilities than involving people with dementia in the general community.

“We had some walking before, but the group is more powerful since this project began. Residents started seeking staff to walk and this was empowering for them. We weren’t expecting anything like that.”

Pilot site service provider

Resources were developed to support the inclusion of people with dementia in the program as well as to help explain the disease.

Statistical analyses

Statistical analyses (paired sample t-tests) were conducted to determine whether taking part in the Active Body Active Brain program improved participants’ wellbeing using the QOL-AD evaluation tool.

Analyses showed that participating in the program resulted in a modest overall improvement in participants’ quality of life, with notable improvements in the quality of relationships with family members and in sleeping patterns.

Consumer involvement

Alzheimer’s Australia’s Consumer Dementia Research Network’s involvement in the pilot had a significant influence. Individuals assisted in shaping the type and content of resources. Their contribution as a group included:

- selecting the project for funding from a competitive field of applications to Alzheimer’s Australia’s National Quality Dementia Care Initiative
- participating in the project reference group and selected pilot face-to-face forums and workshops
- reviewing and providing feedback on pilot resources
- highlighting the reality, practicality and importance of walking for people with dementia.



Who was involved in the pilot?

The people



138 registered Walkers



65% were female

81% were 71 years or older

10%

from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities



8%

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Average walking time was

35



minutes ranging from a daily to a weekly walk

The 15 pilot sites

12 residential aged-care facilities

2 community-based day respite programs

1 Alzheimer's Australia program

Expressions of interest
34 groups

Did not register
17 groups

Registered to participate in pilot
17 groups

Dropped out
2 groups

Completed pilot
15 groups (138 Walkers)

Did not participate in evaluation
4 groups

Participated in evaluation

11 groups (38 people with dementia and 20 of their family carers, plus staff perceptions of 13 Greek residents' quality of life)

Challenges

During the pilot period, several challenges were faced:

- the recognition for high staff numbers to organise a formal walk – dedicated staff and time were needed
- the ability to be flexible – sometimes a pre-arranged walk did not happen
- more support was required to link people with dementia to community HFW groups.

Conclusions

The pilot clearly demonstrated that interventions for behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia can be simply achieved through purposeful engagement in group physical activity combined with social interaction.

The Active Body Active Brain pilot also showed the ability to implement this intervention nationally and the benefits of the partnership between HFW, ACH Group and Alzheimer's Australia. It reinforced the health message of 'what is good for your brain is good for your body and your heart'. This message, and the promotion of walking for people with dementia, remains an important focus for all the organisations involved.



Reference

1. Logsdon R, Gibbons L, McCurry S et al. Quality of life in Alzheimer's disease: patient and caregiver reports. *J Ment Health Aging* 1999; 5:21–32.



For more information on Heart Foundation Walking visit heartfoundation.org.au/walking

Health Information Service

1300 36 27 87

**TALK ALZHEIMER'S
WALK AUSTRALIA**
FIGHTDEMENTIA.ORG.AU

Alzheimer's Australia is the peak body providing support and advocacy for the more than 332,000 Australians living with dementia.

For more information on dementia visit www.fightdementia.org.au

National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500



For language assistance call the Translating and Interpreting Service 131 450

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