

# The meaning of physical activities for older adults on the Alagoas seaside.

*Carolina Oliveira Gonçalves* \*

*Vagner Reolon Marcelino* \*\*

*Maria da Consolação G. Cunha F. Tavares* \*\*\*

**Abstract:** Regarding the growth of older adults population in Brazil, little is known about the inclusion of this group in places that are supposed to be for young bodies. In this sense, the beach and the activities that are performed there are issues to be explored. The objective of this research is to investigate the significance of physical activity for older adults on the beaches of Alagoas. 63 older adults of both sexes were interviewed using exploratory qualitative approach on seven beaches of Alagoas. Through content analysis, it was found that 84.37% of older adults interviewed practice regular physical activity and that they associate happiness and health to it.

**Key-word:** Beaches. Older adults. Physical Exercising. Aging.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The scientific and technological advances and their consequent changes in lifestyle have resulted in a significant increase in older adult population in our country. Estimates of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2005) indicate that older adults population in Brazil, in 2020 will be more than 31 million, more than double the figure in 2001 (14 million). The United Nations (UN) defined as

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\* Graduate student at UNICAMP, scholar of the PIBIC (Scientific Initiation). State University of Campinas. (UNICAMP) Campinas, SP, Brazil. E-mail: carol.fef06d@gmail.com

\*\* PhD in Adapted Physical Activity and Health. Master in Adapted Physical Activity and Health. Faculdade de Americana (FAM). Campinas, SP, Brazil. E-mail: v.r.m@uol.com.br

\*\*\* Graduated in Medicine. Master and PhD in Internal Medicine. Lecturer in Body Image. Associate Professor at the Department of Adapted Motor Activity at FEF/Unicamp. State University of Campinas (UNICAMP). Campinas, SP, Brazil. E-mail: mcons@fef.unicamp.br

Population Aging the period between 1975 and 2025. (SIQUEIRA; BOTELHO; COELHO, 2002), in which older people are every individual aged 60 or older in developing countries (PEREIRA, R.S.; CURIONI, C.C., 2003).

In the early twentieth century, life expectancy in Brazil was 33.7 years; in 2003 it rose to 71.3 years and the projection for the year 2040 is that Brazil will reach a life expectancy at birth of about 80 years.

Thus, the concern about quality of life among people aged 60 years or older increases and studies have revealed (and, in most cases, they break) myths and taboos related to advancing age. Thus, the fear of growing old is giving place to the desire for a healthy, independent and happy life, especially after the age of 60.

The effects of ageing are universal, but the speed of these changes depends on individual differences and psychological, social and cultural factors experienced by each individual (BALESTRA, 2002). Clearly, the life story of each person and the social context in which he/she was born, grew and developed influences the his/her perception of their own body. Thus, the body perception of older adults differs from when they were young and it is built up through their body relations with the world, with other bodies and with what other people think and demonstrate to think of their bodies (TAVARES, 2003). The construction of this perception is currently influenced by a society that worships young bodies; and, in certain places, we noted that the ageing body is not common or that it does not appear in these places where beauty and young bodies are appreciated. So, at retirement age, we see that older adults are excluded and often away from the coexistence in society (TAVARES, 2007) when they finally have time to enjoy social life. Promoting social interaction may prevent social isolation and enable older adults to face the changes that occur in the body with positive feelings (BERNSTEIN, 1990)

<sup>1</sup>. Our social life consists of the people who surround us and it can both provide opportunities for the practice of physical exercise or discourage and prevent it. One of the significant aspects in this context is social expectation, in which children are curious, teenagers are rebellious and older adults are quiet (NERI; FREIRE, 2000). If the society underestimates older adults associating them with decline and deterioration, their self-confidence and control are destroyed. However, old age can be successful if positively influenced, which means that a good quality of life over the years may preserve their potential. Successful aging depends on society, self-esteem and how the person deals with the limitations and losses that happen during this period (BALTES; BALTES, 1990).

Physical activity has been recommended as a great ally to deal with ageing in its physical, psychological and social context. It is defined as any bodily movement produced by contraction of skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure above resting levels (NAHAS, 2001) and it can be practiced by children, youth and adults with or without disabilities. But the impact of physical activity in people's lives deserves deep reflections and considerations in the context of PE, since it provides health benefits, such as increased muscle strength and bone density, decreased blood pressure, psychological and social development, enhanced self-esteem, stress reduction, improvement of cognitive functions and socialization (ROLIM, 2005). It can also be a leisure activity, especially for seniors who have the opportunity to express their feelings, thoughts and ideas and to interact with society strengthening their cultural and emotional ties (VIANA, 2003).

Despite all these positive aspects, older adults usually do not participate in programs of physical activity because the environment is not conducive to their inclusion. Gyms and clubs, which provide the practice of physical activities, generally fall within the universe of beautiful and young body

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<sup>1</sup> BERNSTEIN apud CASH; PRUZINSKY (1990)

appreciation making the environment not conducive to the engagement of older adults in the activities.

On the beach, physical activities incorporate special meanings, since it is difficult to associate bright sun and summer with loneliness, perhaps because we tend to think that the heat of the season "warms the soul" and that it reduces or removes the feeling of being alone (NERI; FREIRE, 2000). The environment of the beach, alone, is favorable to the socialization of various groups and to the practice of many different activities in a free and healthy way.

The objective of this study was to verify which physical activities older adults who go to the Alagoas beaches practice with greater frequency and what the practice of these activities means to them. The project was carried out for a week with older adults who go to seven beaches of Alagoas and for two days with people from the group "Programa de Saúde na Praia" (Health Program on the beach) maintained by UNIMED/Maceio.

## 2 METHODS

The study was submitted to the Ethics Committee on Human Research of the State University of Campinas (CEP – Unicamp) and approved in October 2007, approval number 729/2007. This was a qualitative exploratory research with descriptive nature (LAKATOS; MARCONI, 1995) carried out in seven beaches of Alagoas seaside.

All the subjects participated voluntarily in the study and the inclusion criteria were as follows: adults aged 60 or older; being on the beach at the time of data collection, informally or as part of the UNIMED group of physical activity- Saúde na Praia (Health Program on the Beach); and signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF). Some of them agreed to participate, but declined to provide their personal data and sign the ICF. These were excluded from the study.

The beaches were selected using a drawing stratified by region. The beaches of Pajuçara, Ponta Verde and Jatiúca were drawn in the region of Maceio; on the Northern coast, the beaches of Sonho Verde (Green Dream) and Barra de Santo Antônio and, on the southern coast, Praia do Francês (French Beach) and Praia do Gunga (Gunga Beach).

The data collection was performed using unstructured interviews focused on specific goals (LAKATOS; MARCONI, 1995). The interview consisted of five questions (three objective questions and two subjective) besides personal data such as name, age and place of birth. The researcher followed the topics previously established, but she was free to adapt them to the circumstances of the investigative field. Data collection occurred on the beaches, where the researcher used non-probabilistic intentional approach (BARROS; LEHEFELD, 2000). The researcher introduced herself to people apparently aged 60 years or older, explained the research, the questionnaire, the purposes and the inclusion criteria, so she gave them the ICF and waited until they read it. The doubts were clarified and she interviewed those who signed the ICF. This phase of the research took place at two different moments: in the week from 7 to 14 January 2008, from 6am to 10am and from 3pm to 5pm, on the beaches selected; and in February of the same year, for two days only, in the morning with the physical activity group of UNIMED – Saúde na Praia (Health on the beach), located on the beach of Jatiúca.

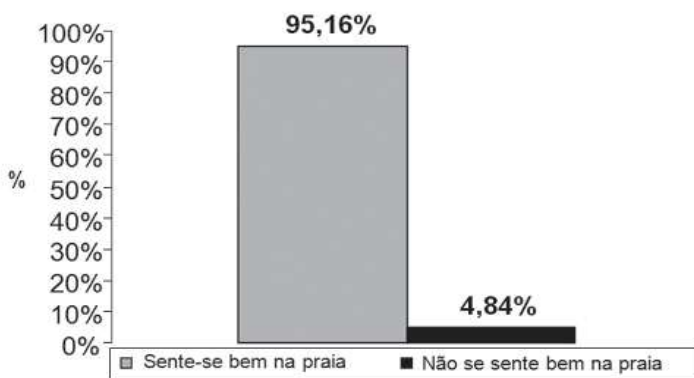
Qualitative analysis was performed by counting absolute frequencies, subsequently converted into relative frequencies (percentages) which were then used for descriptive analysis of the data.

### 3 RESULTS

The sample consisted of 63 older adults, 50 women and 13 men with a mean age of 68.69 years. Of these, 41 were

chosen randomly on the beaches and 22 of them participated in the group activities “Health on the Beach”.

Regarding the feeling of being on the beach, most the interviewed said they like being there (Figure 1), because they felt good to do so. Some reports: "I feel wonderful ... just looking at the sea makes me feel calmer"; " I feel younger"; "Coming to the beach is my health insurance " and " I feel totally integrated". These reports indicate that the beach environment is conducive to some activities such as physical relaxation, which provide a favorable environment for the integration of people with nature.



**Figure 1** Percentage of people who feel good on the beach

Only three people said that they didn't like being on the beach and that they were there only because they had to look after their grandchildren. They stated they didn't like the sand neither the agitation typical of the beach environment.

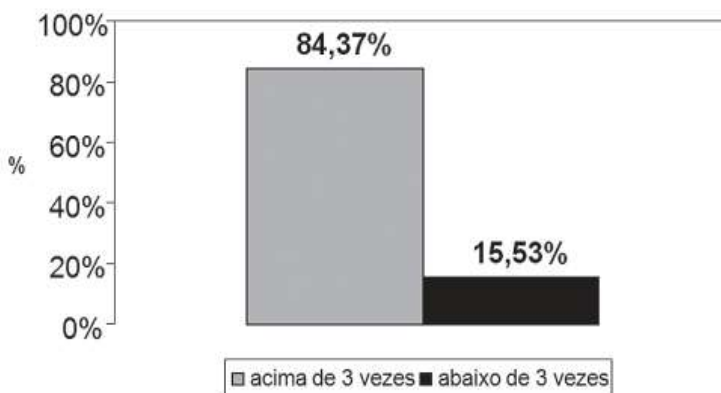
Table 1 illustrates the responses obtained in relation to the practice of the activities. More than half of older adults prefer to do *physical activities* such as: walking along the waterfront or on the sand, water aerobics, swimming, dancing, yoga, soccer running, stretching, fishing and volleyball. The *Socialization Activities* represent 30.15% of the activities

mentioned by the subjects of the sample. “Chatting”, going to pubs to “have a drink”, playing with friends or their grandchildren on the sand, “flirting with the girls” and participating in group activities are a priority for these people. Other kind of activity mentioned by them was *Cognitive leisure activities* such as playing domino and cards, admiring the sea, watching people surfing, stepping on the sand, sunbathing, sitting and feeling the sea breeze, doing crosswords.

Tabela 1. Preferência de Atividades Realizadas na Praia.

Características das Atividades	Preferência (%)
Atividades Físicas	60,31
Atividades de Socialização	30,15
Atividades Cognitivas e de Lazer	9,52
Total	100

Regarding Physical Activities, Figure 2 illustrates how often older adults practice them and it also shows significant participation of these older adults in the activities at least three times a week.



**Figure 2** Frequency of Physical Activities per week

The meaning of the Physical Activities for the population studied is shown in Table 2. More than 60% of the people interviewed attributed to the activities benefits related to *Health* promotion, which for them, is related to physical well-being, relief from body pains, improved sleep, reduction in the use of drugs and to the control of variables such as cholesterol and blood pressure. They illustrate these in the following reports: “Physical activities are wonderful, they substitute well the tranquilizers I take...”; “PE reduced my stress, body pains and blood pressure and improved my sleep”. The factors that follow in smaller proportion are *Psychological and/or Social* such as happiness, peace, contact with more people and making new friends, therapy, improvements in the mood and stress reduction, “it’s good to forget problems” and a good escape valve to prevent depression”. The respondents who linked physical activity with *Leisure* correspond to 14.28% and they said that they practice it in their free time, and that it is a hobby and the moment to forget their problems.

Tabela 2. Significados Atribuídos para Atividades Físicas Realizadas.

Aspectos	Preferência (%)
Saúde	66,66
Psicólogos / Sociais	19,04
Lazer	14,28
Total	100

Although the participation of the group in physical activities is great, there are some obstacles that prevent or make it difficult for them to do the activities. The biggest one is the fear of going out alone. Most of them go to the beach only if they have company because they are afraid of violence or because they don’t like being alone. Respondents were also asked about the structure that the city offers and another difficulty arose when they reported lack of toilets on the beach and the lack of organized groups, with physical education teachers to help them to do the activities. Some of the reports were: “Lack of incentives for guided-activities”; “I miss oriented games, dynamic activities”.



## 4 DISCUSSION

From the results, it can be seen that most of older adults who frequently go to Alagoas coast feel some identification with the beach environment. The presence of this population on the beaches of Alagoas coast is highly significant and the reports of the respondents emphasize the integration relationship they can establish with the environment.

For this reason, the majority of respondents choose the beach as a place for entertainment, as a leisure option and also for doing physical activities. The last with a frequency of at least three times a week for most of the investigation subjects. It can be seen from these data that even with a poor structure (lack of toilets and showers) and the previously mentioned obstacles (fear of violence, lack of companionship, among others) older adults go to the beaches and there they do their activities. This leads us to think that with a better structure, 15.53% of older adults who do not do regular activities would have an incentive to change their lifestyle. These changes would be extremely beneficial and could make the process of aging healthier through regular practice of physical activities such as walking and other recreational and leisure activities (MARIN, 2003).

We observed that 34.9% of the total respondents are part of the group Saúde na Praia. This number shows scenario of great participation regarding regular practice of physical activities, but even when not considering the group, the majority of respondents (76%) practice some kind of regular physical activity. It is a significant index for the state of Alagoas, but states from other regions have better adherence of older adults to physical activities. This is the case in southern Brazil, which, when compared to the Northeast, has lower index of inactivity for the population of adults and people aged 60 years or older (SIQUEIRA, 2008). Thus, the hypothesis that the Northeast has poorer infrastructure and less public support arose.

Public support is necessary in order to make the practice of physical activity a routine for older adults in the Northeast, which is already a reality in the city of Recife, where the Ministry of Health has a project that consists of inserting the practice of physical activity in the public health network's daily routine (SIQUEIRA, 2008). It is known that usually these proposals are of economic interests, such as reducing hospital admissions and human resources spending. The results show that the gains are not only economic, but above all the improvement in people's quality of life in different aspects, whether physical, psychological or social (BENEDETTI et al., 2007).

It is noteworthy that the number of respondents who feel good about being on the beach may have been high (95.16%) due to the fact that the survey was conducted in the beach environment. As for those who were on the beach and said they didn't like being there, we believe in the hypothesis that this is due to the conditions abovementioned, such as: lack of infrastructure, the fact that the beach creates an exclusion atmosphere where beautiful and young body are appreciated, besides the hypothesis that these older adults may have experienced some negative situations on the place. Since it is not age that causes changes in body image, but the way each person lives his/her experiences, and that the changes in body image are more associated with changes in activities than actually aging (MONTEIRO, 2001).

However, we realized, through the results obtained in this study that this condition is not a general rule. Many of older adults like being on the beach, enjoying their time, doing physical exercise or simply talking or doing other things.

It can be concluded from the results presented that most of older adults who go to the beaches of Alagoas do so for practicing physical activities, followed by socializing and leisure activities. The prevalence of physical activity is due to the need to keep or improve health. Thus, it can be affirmed

that the beach can be seen also as an environment that is conducive to a healthy ageing process.

**O Significado para idosos da prática de atividades físicas nas praias do litoral alagoano**

**Resumo:** A respeito do crescimento da população de idosos no Brasil, pouco se sabe sobre inserção deste grupo nos supostos redutos de corpos jovens. Nesse sentido, a praia e as atividades que nela se encontram são temas a serem explorados. O objetivo desta pesquisa é investigar o significado da prática de atividades físicas por idosos nas praias de Alagoas. Numa abordagem exploratória de cunho qualitativo, foram entrevistados 63 idosos de ambos os sexos em sete praias. Através da análise de conteúdo, verificou-se que 84,37% dos entrevistados praticam atividade física regular e atribuem à prática significados como felicidade e saúde.

**Palavras-chave:** Praias. Idoso. Exercício. Envelhecimento.

**El significado para personas de tercera edad en la practica de la actividad fisica en las playas del litoral alagoano**

**Resumen:** Respecto al crecimiento de la población de personas de tercera edad en Brasil poco se conoce sobre la inserción de este grupo en la cultura de los “cuerpos jóvenes”. En ese sentido, la playa y las actividades que en ella se encuentran es un tema a ser investigado. El objetivo de este estudio es investigar el significado de la práctica de actividades físicas por personas de tercera edad en las playas de Alagoas. Desde esa perspectiva y con un abordaje de tipo cualitativo, fueron entrevistados 63 sujetos de ambos sexos en siete playas, donde los resultados a través del análisis de contenidos permitieron verificar que El 84,37% de los entrevistados practican actividad física regular y atribuyen que dicha práctica conlleva a la felicidad y salud.

**Palabras clave:** Playas. Anciano. Ejercicio. Envejecimiento.

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