

Original Article

# Exploring older adults' experiences of community-based exercise programs in community nursing interventions: A qualitative study

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## Abstract

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**Background:** The increasing number of older adults is a challenge for public health systems, especially in low- and middle-income countries, because the aging process is often accompanied by a decline in physical function and quality of life in the elderly. Although various studies have shown that community nursing interventions through physical exercise programs have been proven effective, an in-depth understanding of how older adults interpret and directly experience their involvement in these programs is still limited.

**Objective:** This study aims to explore the experiences of older adults who participated in a community-based physical exercise program in Malang City using a qualitative phenomenological approach.

**Methods:** A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted among 24 older adults living in Malang City, Indonesia, who participated in a six-week community-based exercise program. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Data were collected through individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted in participants' homes after completion of the intervention. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed manually using thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability strategies, including member checking, field notes, audit trails, and independent coding by two researchers.

**Results:** the data was analyzed thematically and produced four main themes: (i) Rediscovering Physical Capability and Body Confidence, (ii) Exercise as a Meaningful and Enjoyable Social Experience, (iii) Growing Awareness of Health and Self-Care, and (iv) The Community Nurse as a Catalyst for Engagement and Safety.

**Conclusion:** These findings of this study highlight that community nurses play a role not only as instructors but also as facilitators capable of fostering motivation, self-confidence, and sustained participation in older adults through an individual-centered approach. Therefore, nurse-initiated community-based physical exercise programs should be considered for more systematic integration into public health policies as part of strategies to support healthy and sustainable aging.

## Background

Population aging is a global phenomenon, which equally affects public health systems in low- and middle- income countries. Although the increased number of older people is a sign of health development, it also creates new and numerous challenges for health services, including the decreased functional ability of the elderly, the presence of multiple chronic diseases, and the reduction of quality of life (Gianfredi et al., 2025; Kallestrup-lamb et al., 2024). As they age, older adults often experience limitations in mobility, independence, and social participation (Lee, 2019). In urban settings, including Malang City, the complexity of these challenges increases. In urban communities, the situation is made worse by a high presence of low-activity and sedentary

lifestyles which contribute to the deterioration of health of older adults. In addition, the existing health promotion programs that target this age group, especially regarding physical activity and exercise are insufficient. These factors highlight the needs to enhance urban older adults' specific community-based programs.

Evidence shows that physical activity plays a crucial role in maintaining independence, as ADL is significantly associated with elderly independence (Saputra et al., 2024), while structured and balance-focused exercise programs improve physical function, psychological well-being, social participation, and reduce fall risk among older adults (Chalkia et al., 2025; Lisdahayati et al., 2025).

Using participatory and community empowerment approaches, the development of

promotive and preventive interventions can help older adults improve and maintain their functional capacity and support their independence (Motamed-jahromi & Kaveh, 2021). Furthermore, these interventions can help lessen the needs of older adults for formal health services. From a community nursing perspective, the goal of healthy aging and the preservation of functional abilities among older adults requires community-based interventions that are easily accessible, and integrated, and accepted by older adults in their everyday lives. Community-based exercise programs are a means of addressing the multiple dimensions of physical and psychosocial health, and are an important means of promoting active aging (Avers, 2010; Fien et al., 2022).

Community nurses created and initiated the Community-Based Exercise Program for this study, which aims to be organized yet flexible, and can be initiated in a community environment (Aditya et al., 2024). The Community-Based Exercise Program encompasses several core activities. These involve the evaluation of older adults' physical functional capacity, the provision of health education which emphasizes the role of physical activity and nutrition in the mitigation of chronic illnesses, and the facilitation of group-based exercise classes. The health education aspect of the physical activity program employs a range of media to support the varying learning preferences and literacy levels of older adults, including video, module, and brochure. The group-based exercise activities, which include walking, square stepping, and yoga, are organized and adapted to the functional ability and safety concerns of the participants.

Focusing on community nursing, these activities demonstrate vital nursing functions, such as assessing health status, providing health education, promoting health, and providing continuing support to enhance the quality of life of elderly individuals (Cho, 2023; Juanita et al., 2022). Community nurses serve as both facilitators and motivators, providing a safe environment and fostering social engagement among the elderly. Community exercise programs provide nurses with the opportunity to enhance social support and bolster older adults' confidence in the pursuit of sustained physical activity (Fernandes et al., 2023).

Although community-based exercise programs have shown positive results in quantitative research, however there are few studies examining the experiences of older adults participating in these programs when integrated into community nursing practice. There is a need to explore older adults' experiences to understand community nursing interventions' impact on older adults' motivational and participatory engagement in community-based exercise programs. This study is aimed at exploring older adults' experiences in community-based exercise programs as community nursing interventions.

## Methods

### *Study Design*

The study used a phenomenological approach within the framework of qualitative research in an attempt to understand the lived experiences of older participants in a community-based exercise program as part of community nursing interventions. The phenomenological approach seeks to obtain as much information as possible on the experiences of participants as they and realize during the intervention (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). This approach allows researchers to capture subjective perspectives and insights into experiences that cannot be adequately explored through quantitative methods.

### *Participants*

The study population consisted of older adults living in Malang City, Indonesia, who participated in a community nursing intervention by implementing community-based exercise programs. A total of 24 older adults were recruited through purposive sampling through the collaboration with program coordinators and elderly community health volunteers for their active participation in the intervention program for 6 weeks. The study's inclusion criteria were (1) aged 60 years or older, (2) had residency in Malang City, (3) participants were members of the community-based exercise program for the entire duration of the study, and (4) participants were able to provide informed consent and communicate. Adults with significant cognitive impairment or medical conditions that would inhibit interview

participation were excluded. The sample size was adequate for the study when data saturation was reached.

### *Data Collection*

Data collection was conducted after the 6-week study intervention was complete. Individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to capture participants' experiences in the community-based exercise program, and the perceived impacts of the program on the participants' older adult's functionality, daily living, and overall quality of life. Interviews were guided to promote uniformity, while varying the opportunities for participants to share experiences. The interview guide was developed based on relevant literature and study objectives and pilot tested with ten older adults who were not included in the main study. All interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, which were chosen to provide a familiar and comfortable environment that allowed participants to speak openly about their experiences. Each interview was conducted face-to-face by the researcher with only the participant present, unless the participant requested the presence of a family member. Every single interview was conducted in the local language and took 30-60 minutes. Participants were asked for their consent to audio record of the interviews and transcribed verbatim by the research team. Follow-up clarification was conducted when necessary through brief communication with participants. Field notes were created during and after each interview to capture nonverbal cues that supported data interpretation. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached which no new themes or significant information emerged from additional interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as described by Krauss & Lee (2015) to identify patterns and meanings within participants' experiences. The analysis included (1) multiple readings of the transcripts to arrive at a thorough understanding of the data, (2) coding of specific elements of the texts which encapsulated the experience of the participants, (3) grouping codes into categories, and (4)

formulating themes that are representative of the phenomenon or experience. The trustworthiness and rigor of the analysis are outlined using the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Two researchers independently reviewed and coded the transcripts, and differences in coding were discussed until consensus was reached to ensure analytical rigor. The analysis was conducted manually without the use of qualitative analysis software.

### *Trustworthiness*

Research data validity was maintained through criteria of credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. These four components ensure the scientific quality and rigor of qualitative research by emphasizing accuracy, consistency, neutrality, and the relevant application of findings (Akbar, 2026). There was recorded evidence of research credibility due to the presence of the researchers at the intervention and interviews, the audio and verbatim recordings, and member checking with six participants, which was the interviews summarized and then confirmed to the participants. Dependability was demonstrated through the audit of the research process, the document outlining the research methodology, the interviews, and the data that was analyzed in a systematic way and was all part of the audit. Confirmability was achieved through including the interview transcripts, field notes, and other resources as data sources. A sufficient, detailed description of the research context aided Transferability.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the research ethics committee at Malang State University before data collection. All the participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study, and the possible risks and benefits. The participants received and signed informed consent prior to their participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

## Results

A total of 24 participants were included in the study (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Demographic Data of Study Participants

Characteristics	n	%
<b>Age (years)</b>		
60-64 years	12	50.0
65-69 years	11	45.8
70 years and older	1	4.2
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	13	54.2
Female	11	45.8
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	14	58.3
Widowed	8	33.3
Divorced	2	8.3
<b>Education Level</b>		
Primary education	5	20.8
Secondary education	8	33.3
Tertiary education	11	45.8
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Retired	21	87.5
Part-time employed	3	12.5

Table 1 shows that most participants were in the early elderly age group and mainly retired. This suggests that participants were relatively active and had sufficient time to participate in the intervention, which positively impacted adherence and outcomes. Higher levels of education among participants imply better health literacy, leading to a stronger understanding and acceptance of the intervention. Furthermore, the marital status of the participants, especially the presence of widowed participants, indicates a possible difference in social support that could influence motivation and participation, which may affect the overall findings of the study.

The thematic analysis in this study showed four main themes describing the experiences of older adults participating in community-based exercise programs (Table 2). Community nurses were involved in facilitating the community-based exercise programs but were not involved in interviews or data collection.

**Table 2.** Themes Extracted from The Study

Theme	Subthemes
Theme 1: Rediscovering Physical Capability and Body Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Perceived improvement in functional ability</li> <li>▪ Increased confidence in body movement</li> </ul>
Theme 2: Exercise as a Meaningful and Enjoyable Social Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sense of togetherness and peer support</li> <li>▪ Motivation through shared experiences</li> </ul>
Theme 3: Growing Awareness of Health and Self-Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increased understanding of physical activity and nutrition</li> <li>▪ Shift toward proactive health behaviours</li> </ul>

### Theme 1: Rediscovering Physical Capability and Body Confidence

Participants described changes in their physical function that positively impacted their body image and daily living activities. Participants also reported increased endurance and ease of movement within their daily activities.

*"Before, I felt tired very quickly, even after walking short distances. Now my body feels lighter." (P5)*

*"I can walk longer without stopping, which I couldn't do before joining this program." (P17)*

For some participants, these changes led to greater independence.

*"I don't need to rely on others as much anymore. I feel more capable." (P24)*

Apart from physical changes, participants also described improvements in confidence to move and less fear that they would suffer an injury.

*"At first, I was afraid to move too much because I thought I might fall." (P6)*

*"After being guided step by step, I feel more confident using my body." (P13)*

Theme 1 shows that participants perceived physical improvements and changes in how they viewed their bodies. This experience demonstrates that this community-based exercise program can build a positive body

image and a sense of control over their physical abilities.

### *Theme 2: Exercise as a Meaningful and Enjoyable Social Experience*

Participants viewed the group exercise program as a positive social activity offering psychological benefits. Several participants emphasized the sense of togetherness and the reduced loneliness often experienced by older adults.

*"When I exercise alone at home, it feels boring. Here, we laugh and move together" (P8)*

*"Just the fact that I can meet peers is enough to make me feel happier and less lonely." (P20)*

Motivation to attend sessions was also expressed by some participants due to the support of the group.

*"If I feel lazy and don't want to come, I always remind myself that I will meet my group." (P2)*

*"Meeting my peers being physically active motivates me to keep exercising." (P26)*

This theme reflects how participants viewed the exercise program as more than just a physical activity program. They viewed it as a social experience that could enhance their emotional well-being and sense of belonging.

### *Theme 3: Growing Awareness of Health and Self-Care*

Participants reflected on what they had learned about the importance of physical exercise and health information during the health education and activity sections of the community-based exercise program. Several participants also expressed that the program changed their perspective on physical activity.

*"I thought exercise was only for young people. Now I know it's important for us too." (P7)*

Health education about nutrition and physical activity was perceived as useful and relevant.

*"The explanation was simple, so I could understand and apply it at home." (P16)*

Some participants mentioned that they actively changed their behaviors in the periods between the scheduled sessions.

*"Now I try to walk every morning, even if it's just around the house." (P10)*

*"I pay more attention to what I eat because I understand its effect on my body." (P21)*

In conclusion, participants' statements show that this community-based physical exercise program increased their knowledge. It also empowered them to make informed decisions and adopt healthier behaviors. This supports ongoing health improvement in their daily lives.

### *Theme 4: The Community Nurse as a Catalyst for Engagement and Safety*

In the context of this research, community nurses play an important role as facilitators and physiologists who were considered the main component that can influence participant involvement. The participants reported the trust and assurance they had from the nurses.

*"I feel safe because the nurses are always watching over and guiding us." (P4)*

*"If something feels uncomfortable, I can immediately ask the nurse." (P18)*

The participants appreciated the individualized support and motivation

*"The nurse explained which movements I need to modify due to my knee." (P9)*

*"They encouraged us, but not in a forced way, more in a motivating way." (P28)*

Some participants indicated that the engagement of nurses raised their level of dedication to the program.

*"The nurses motivate me to continue coming." (P12)*

Participants' statements indicate that community nurses helped them in creating a safe, supportive and motivating environment that increased their confidence and encouraged them to participate continuously in the program.

## Discussion

This study offers in-depth insights into the experiences of older adults participating in community in community-based exercise programs delivered through community nursing interventions in an Indonesian urban setting. The program was revealed to be a multifaceted intervention that transformed participants' perceptions of their functional capacity, social functioning, health status, and awareness of the importance of professional support. This study focused on describing the subjective and contextual experiences of a community-based exercise program for older adults, thus contributing to the very limited evidence-based literature.

The narratives expressed by participants showed an increase in perceived functional capacity accompanied by an increased confidence in older adults when they perform body movements during the exercise program. Furthermore, participants also expressed a decreased fear of injury due to being accompanied by professionals, in this case community nurses who were certified sports physiologists. The physical functional capacity of the elderly refers to their ability to perform daily activities, maintain independence, and improve quality of life (Repka & Muszalik, 2023).

The results of this study align with evidence from quantitative studies showing that multicomponent exercise programs can improve mobility, balance, and endurance in older adults (Flores-bello et al., 2024; Sananta et al., 2025). However, this study identifies a new phenomenon: improvements in functional capacity in older adults can be seen as the beginning of restoring their autonomy and self-confidence. This finding is important because fear of movement and vulnerability are commonly perceived by older adults as major barriers to physical activity (Bovolini et al., 2023; Goubran et al., 2025). Community exercise programs can help participants to overcome their perceived barriers and encourage further engagement.

Focus of these exercise programs to the social benefits is a main driver for participation of older adults. The group-based setting provides a fun and emotionally supportive environment, and reduces isolation, and increases the drive to exercise. Prior research has shown the importance of social support in physical activity participation in older adults (Lieber et al., 2024; Steinhoff & Reiner, 2024). This study demonstrates that social interaction is not a supportive factor, social interaction is the reason why older adults attach meaning to their involvement in exercise. The collective experience in sport activities turns what may be considered an individual activity into a social activity that enhances motivation and long-term participation.

Integrated health education in this community-based exercise program increases participants' awareness of the importance of physical activity and balanced nutrition, encouraging them to be more proactive in changing health behaviors. A study shows that physical activity combined with health education is more effective in improving health literacy and self-management in older adults (Jung et al., 2025). It is in line with other studies that emphasize that health education will be more impactful if delivered in simple, accessible, and practical formats relevant to their health. It reinforces the importance of experiential and contextual health education in community nursing interventions and shows that knowledge alone is insufficient without the opportunity to apply it directly. (Babak et al., 2022).

This study makes a significant new contribution by explaining the role of community nurses from the perspective of older adults. Community nurses were consistently described by participants as trustworthy professionals who ensure safety, provide guidance in implementing intervention programs, and offer emotional support. While earlier studies recognized the value of professional supervision during exercise programs (Claudio & Alexandre, 2018), this study goes a step further by demonstrating how community nurses with additional qualifications and specializations, in this case certified exercise physiologists, are seen as facilitators of older adults' participation

and retention in exercise programs. The relationship and adaptability of community nursing practice, which is often neglected in practice, are most clearly articulated in these findings.

The contribution of this study also adds to its novelty. The study was conducted in an urban community setting in Indonesia, a low- to middle-income country, and provides culturally relevant data where qualitative studies of community-based exercise programs are still limited. The combination of functional capacity examination, group-based health education and exercise with a community nursing approach provides a clear and practical framework in promoting healthy aging. This study offers novel insights by providing information that can be used to design individualized and sustained community nursing practice interventions.

The results reflect that community-based exercise programs implemented by community nurses function as multi-faceted interventions that target the physical, social, and cognitive dimensions of aging. The phenomenological approach helps to gain further insights into how and why these programs have significance for older people, thereby enhancing evidence-based, responsive community nursing practice.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Community nursing in combination with community-based exercise programs is described by older adults participating in the programs as a positive holistic experience. Community based exercise programs build older adults' confidence in their physical abilities, helps forms social networks, enhances health awareness, and develops trust in community nurses as health promoters. Community nurses are seen as more than program implementers. This study reveals they are active motivators, and help older adults develop the right mix of perception of safety, and social supports for sustained participation in physical activities. This study is limited by its urban location and the inclusion of participants post intervention which potentially limits the transferability of the findings. Iterative research is warranted in other contexts with participants of varying adherence, and a mixed-method approach is suggested to address the

sustainability and potential of community nurses exercise programs to promote healthy aging in older adults.

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## Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Declaration on the Use of AI

AI-assisted tools were used solely for language refinement, including grammar correction and sentence clarity. The authors confirm that all conceptualization, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript content were developed independently by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and originality of the work.

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