2026 ACSM Worldwide Fitness Trends

Future Directions of the Health and Fitness Industry

by Cayla R. McAvoy, Ph.D., M.S., ACSM-EP, EIM;
Alexios Batrakoulis, Ph.D., FACSM, ACSM-EP, ACSM-CPT, EIM, CSCS*D;
Sarah M. Camhi, Ph.D., FACSM, ACSM-EP, EIM, FAHA; Jessica (Sudock) Sansone, Ph.D., M.S., ACSM-EP, EIM;
Jennifer Turpin Stanfield, M.A., ACSM-EP, EIM; and Rachelle Reed, Ph.D., M.S., ACSM-EP

International Contributors: Australia: Chris Alexander, AEP, AES, MBA; Finland: Kasper Salin, Ph.D.; Iran: Saeid Fatolahi, M.S., Ph.D.; Farnaz Dinizadeh, M.S.; Mexico: Lino Francisco Jacobo Gomez Chávez, Ph.D.; Paola Cortés Almanzar, Ph.D.; Jorge López Haro, Ph.D.; Adrián Ricardo Pelayo-Zavalza, M.S.; Poland: Anna Szumilewicz, Ph.D.; Dagmara Damps, M.Sc.; Magdalena Piernicka, Ph.D.; Justyna Labun, M.Sc.; Karina Zajączkowska, M.Sc.; Portugal: Susana Franco, Ph.D.; Liliana Ramos, Ph.D.; Rita Santos-Rocha, Ph.D.; Spain: Oscar L. Veiga, Ph.D., M.Sc.; Juan Jose Palos, M.Sc.; Manel Velcarce-Torrente, Ph.D., M.Sc.; Taiwan: Pitt Tseng, M.S.

Apply It!

- Describe the top 20 fitness trends as identified by exercise professionals across sectors in 2026.
- Use survey results to guide programming, hiring, and strategic planning grounded in practitioner insight.
- Apply trend themes (e.g., individualization, integration, and inclusion) to better meet client and community needs.

Key words: Trends, Fitness Industry, Wellness, Survey, Technology

INTRODUCTION

In 2025, the fitness industry was characterized by the integration of digital health tools, a heightened focus on longevity and recovery, and increased demand for personalized, evidence-based exercise options. These developments were supported by the continued utilization of hybrid training models, blending in-person services with virtual or app-based programming, and by new technologies that strengthened the link between physical activity (PA) and broader health outcomes (1). At the same time, the rapid spread of health information on social media continued to influence consumer behavior, shape program design, and emphasize the social aspects of fitness, particularly among younger populations (2). Many of the client participation patterns established during the COVID-19 pandemic persisted into 2025, continuing to influence when, how, and where people engaged in PA, across indoor and outdoor spaces, digital and in-person formats, and clinical and recreational settings (1). Together, the defining features of 2025 set the stage for a more integrated, adaptive, and data-informed health and fitness landscape in 2026.

Against this backdrop, ACSM's 2026 Worldwide Survey of Fitness Trends offers timely insights into how professionals across the sector view the future of the industry. Since 2006, ACSM has gathered input from thousands of exercise professionals worldwide, capturing perspectives from clinical, community, commercial, and corporate settings. Now in its 20th year, the survey provides a long-term perspective of how the field has evolved, from early concerns about childhood obesity to the rise of wearable technology and medically integrated programs. This milestone marks a

meaningful opportunity to reflect on the industry's progress and thoughtfully consider its future direction.

The annual trends article is intended to help readers understand the findings in relation to their own context. Whether refining services in a fitness club, adapting training programs to meet client needs, shaping PA policies, or researching implementation and impact, the results offer practical guidance to inform decision-making. Survey findings offer both a snapshot of current practices and insight into emerging priorities and areas of growing momentum across the health and fitness industry.

ACSM TRENDS SURVEY METHODS

ACSM's 2026 Worldwide Survey of Fitness Trends was designed to capture feedback from a global cross-section of exercise professionals working in commercial, community, clinical, and corporate settings. Trend items are reviewed and refined annually by an appointed ACSM workgroup. Each year, survey items are added, revised, or removed based on the workgroup's multidisciplinary expertise, current evidence, emerging industry language, and applicability to professional practice. In 2026, the definition of a "fitness trend" was updated to better distinguish enduring shifts in the field from short-term fads (Sidebar).

The online survey was distributed via ACSM's email lists, newsletters, international partners, and social media platforms between May and June 2025. Respondents who completed the survey were eligible to enter a voluntary drawing to receive one $100 MasterCard gift card or one of 9 free ACSM books. Personal information was kept confidential and used solely for prize distribution. A total of 2,038 survey responses were collected from the U.S.-based version of the survey.

Participants were asked to rate 50 potential fitness trends, separated into nine categories (Figure 1) on a 10-point Likert-type scale, from 1 ("definitely not a trend") to 10 ("definitely a trend"), with an additional "no familiarity" option. All trend items were optional and could be skipped. Each survey section also included space for open-ended comments. To ensure data integrity, responses were excluded if they showed evidence of

Sidebar. How the ACSM Trends Workgroup Defines Fitness Trends versus Fads

TREND: *A fitness trend is a widely adopted and/or sustained pattern in health and fitness participation, professional practice, or industry offerings. Unlike fads, trends persist beyond temporary enthusiasm and demonstrate measurable engagement, market presence, or long-term impact.*

FAD: *A fashion that is taken up with great enthusiasm for a brief period; a craze (http://dictionary.reference.com).*

Figure 1. 2026 fitness trends by category.

Category	Trends
PHYSICAL EXERCISE SETTING	Commercial/Multi-Purpose Gyms; Fitness Centers with Medical Integration; At-Home Fitness and Recovery; Outdoor Fitness Activities; Premium Health Clubs and Spas; Specialized Fitness Studios (Boutiques)
STRUCTURED EXERCISE	Adult Recreation and Sport Clubs; Group Fitness Classes; Personal Training (Face-to-Face, Online, or Hybrid); Small Group Training
FITNESS BUSINESS MODEL	Employing Certified Exercise Professionals; Reimbursement for Qualified Exercise Professionals; Flexible Membership Options; Employer-Sponsored Fitness and Wellness Programs; Health/Wellness Coaching
EXERCISE PRESCRIPTION FOR CLINICAL POPULATIONS	Exercise in Cancer Treatment; Exercise for Chronic Disease Management; Exercise in Neurodegenerative Disease Management; Exercise in Physical Rehabilitation and Adaptive Training
EXERCISE PRESCRIPTION FOR HEALTHY POPULATIONS WITH SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS	Body-Inclusive and Weight-Neutral Training; Exercise Programs for Neurodivergent Individuals; Fitness Programs for Older Adults; Youth Active-Lifestyle Building; Youth Athletic Development; Pre- and Postnatal Fitness
TRAINING MODALITIES	Balance, Flow, and Core Strength; Bodyweight Training; Circuit Training; Functional Fitness Training (FFT); High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT); Low-Impact/Joint-Friendly Exercise Options; Mobility and Recovery Training; Traditional Strength Training; Olympic Lifting and Powerlifting
DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY	AI-Driven Fitness Technology; Data-Driven Training Technology; Gamified Fitness Platforms; Influencer/Ambassador-Led Fitness Programs; Mobile Exercise Apps; Wearable Technology
EXERCISE PROGRAMMING	Exercise for Mental Health; Exercise for Weight Management; Exercise for Hormonal Balance; Exercise is Medicine; Lifestyle Medicine
RECOVERY-BASED TECHNOLOGY	Electrical Muscle Stimulation (EMS) Therapies (TENS, NMES, etc); Hot and Cold Therapies (Thermal Therapies); Light-Based Therapies; Neuroregulation Therapies; Percussion, Vibration, and Compression Therapies

low engagement (*e.g.*, all trend items left blank, uniform scoring across 10 or more items, or completed survey duration under 60 seconds). Additional duplicates were removed based on repeat entries using combinations of exact mailing address, email, or recipient ID. After these exclusions, the final analytic sample included 1,540 valid responses (76% of original submissions).

Demographic summaries and professional roles are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. Briefly, survey participants were 49.6% women with a mean age of 43.1 years (range: 18–85 years). Among those who provided demographic information, 39.7% reported holding a Master's or specialist degree, and 58.1% reported having an ACSM certification. The most reported professional roles included personal trainer, exercise physiologist, and research faculty/professor.

Each trend item was ranked by calculating its mean score across valid responses and ordering items from highest to lowest. To aid interpretation, top-ranked trends are summarized using a standardized three-part structure: About (trend description and context), Survey Performance (historical results and patterns), and Application (uses for practice, programming, or policy). This structure is intended to help readers interpret not only which trends are gaining momentum but also how they can be applied in real-world settings.

TABLE 1: Respondent Demographics

Category	Total Respondents (%)
Age *(years; mean 43.1; range = 18–85)*	
<25	9.6
25–34	24.3
35–44	22.3
45–54	19.1
55–64	15.4
65+	9.3
Gender	
Female	49.6
Male	26.8
Nonbinary/Other	23.6
Education	
High school diploma	5.0
Bachelor's degree	32.1
Master's/Specialist degree	39.7
Doctoral/Terminal degree	23.1
Certification Status*	
Certified by ACSM	52.4
Certified by another organization	30.8
Not currently certified	10.9
No certification response	24.9

*Percentages do not equal 100 as participants could select more than one.

ACSM TRENDS SURVEY RESULTS

The 2026 results highlight the continued influence of data and technology on the fitness industry (Table 3). Wearable Technology reclaimed the #1 spot for the third consecutive year and has held the top position nine times, more than any other trend in survey history. Other top-ranked items emphasize recovery, long-term well-being, and inclusive programming (*e.g.*, Exercise for Mental Health, Exercise in Physical Rehabilitation and Adaptive Training, and Exercise for Chronic Disease Management).

For nearly two decades, the ACSM Trends Survey has supported data-informed decision-making across commercial, clinical, corporate, and community settings. Since the inaugural 2007 survey, when Children and Obesity topped the list amid national concern over youth health, the rankings have evolved alongside broader public priorities. In the 2010s, performance-driven approaches gained momentum, with High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) reaching #1 in 2014 and dominating again from 2018 to 2020. Today, trends increasingly reflect integrated models

TABLE 2: Respondents' Fitness Roles, Work Settings, and Experience

Category	Total Respondents (%)
Professional Role	
Personal trainer	15.6
Exercise physiologist	12.7
Research faculty/professor	11.6
Student (Undergraduate or graduate)	10.9
Program manager/Facility operator	9.8
Clinical exercise physiologist	9.5
Group exercise instructor	8.1
Educator/Lecturer	7.3
Medical professional	5.8
Health/Wellness coach	3.2
Owner	1.9
Strength/Sport performance coach	1.5
Registered dietician	1.4
Athletic trainer	0.8
Work Status	
Part-time	64.1
Full-time	35.9
Work Setting	
College/University (Faculty)	23.4
Hospital/Medical fitness center	19.4
Private practice/Own business	14.4
Community-based facility	9.5
Commercial fitness center	8.2
Campus recreation/Wellness center	5.5
Corporate/Employee wellness	4.8
Online fitness/Coaching	2.5
Not listed	12.3
Years of Experience	
Less than 1 year	5.0
1–3 years	10.0
4–6 years	10.8
7–9 years	10.4
10–20 years	29.1
21 or more years	34.6

of physical and mental wellness, prevention, and personalization. See Supplemental Table 1, http://links.lww.com/FIT/A415 for the full historical trend list, and Figures 2–4 for ranking differences by profession, age group, and years of experience.

1. Wearable Technology

About

Wearable Technology includes fitness trackers, smartwatches, heart rate monitors, and GPS devices that collect real-time and trend-based health data. Common metrics include heart rate, steps, speed, and distance. Advanced biosensors now capture additional indicators such as fall or crash detection, heart rhythm, blood pressure, blood glucose, and skin temperature. These tools can support behavior change through feedback, goal setting, coaching, training plans, and integration with other platforms and apps (3). Roughly 36%–44% of adults own wearable technology (4,5), amassing a global market that is projected to be 186 billion by 2030 (6). However, disparities in access and use persist, especially among individuals with lower income, limited education, no medical insurance, older age, cardiovascular disease, or rural residence (4,5).

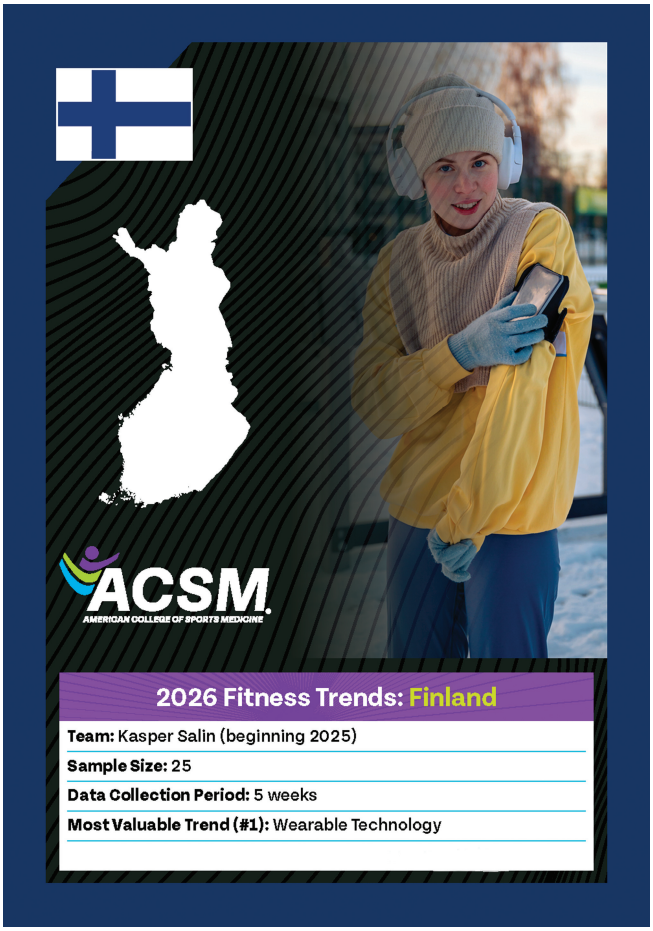


TABLE 3: Fitness Professionals Top 20 Ranked Fitness Trends 2026

2026 Rank	Trend	5-year Trend History
1	Wearable Technology	☑
2	Fitness Programs for Older Adults	☑
3	Exercise for Weight Management	☑
4	Mobile Exercise Apps	☑
5	Balance, Flow, and Core Strength	
6	Exercise for Mental Health	
7	Traditional Strength Training	☑
8	Data-Driven Technology	
9	Adult Recreation and Sport Clubs	★
10	Functional Fitness Training	☑
11	Specialized Fitness Studios (Boutiques)	
12	High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT)	☑
13	Group Fitness Classes	
14	Exercise for Chronic Disease Management	★
15	Employing Certified Exercise Professionals	☑
16	Exercise in Physical Rehabilitation and Adaptive Training	★
17	Hot and Cold Therapies (Thermal Therapies)	
18	Outdoor Fitness Activities	☑
19	Commercial/Multipurpose Gyms (Big Box)	
20	Youth Athletic Development	

☑ = Stable trend; has been on top 20 list every year 2022–2026.
★ = First appearance on top 20 list 2007–2026.

Survey Performance

Since 2016, Wearable Technology has consistently ranked #1, except in 2018 (#3) and 2021 (#2). It held a top three rank in nearly all professions and age groups surveyed (Figures 2 and 3), reflecting its widespread appeal.

Application

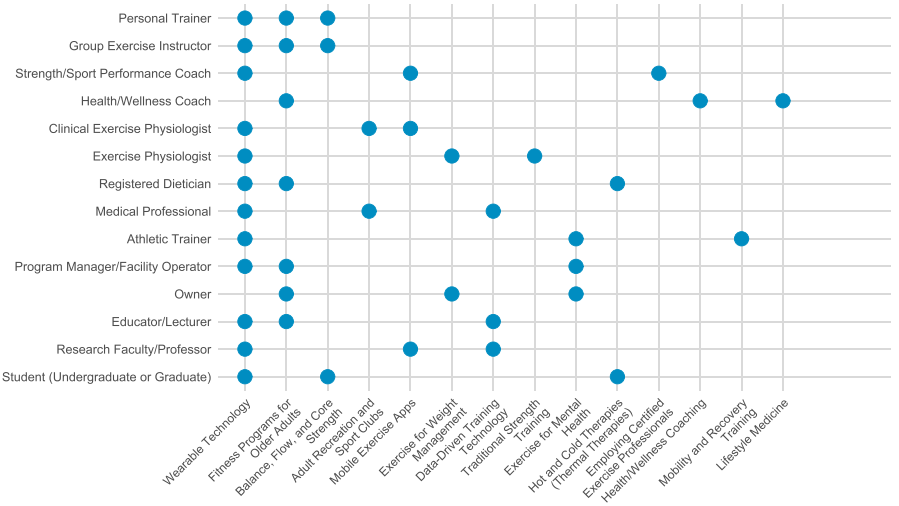
As wearable technologies evolve, exercise professionals must stay informed about differences in device accuracy and user experience (7). Although guidelines exist for evaluating wearables, rapid innovation often outpaces validation (8). Still, these tools can meaningfully support self-monitoring, accountability, and sustained engagement. When applied with intention, wearables enhance individualized coaching and help reinforce healthy habits over time.

2. Fitness Programs for Older Adults

About

This trend addresses the unique physiological changes associated with aging, with a focus on maintaining or improving balance, muscle mass and strength, and mobility. The baby boomer generation includes 73 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964, all of whom will be over age 65 by 2030, intensifying demand for age-appropriate, evidence-based exercise options

Figure 2. Top three fitness trends by professional role.



(9,10). According to the 2023 IHRSA U.S. Health & Fitness Consumer Report, adults ≥65 years now visit gyms and studios more often than any other age group (11).

Survey Performance

With the exception of 2017 and 2022, this trend has appeared in the top 10 each year since the survey began. In the 2026 survey, it ranked highest among respondents ≥65 years, as well as owners, health/wellness coaches, and group exercise instructors.

Application

This ranking, along with recent industry data, points to growing engagement and opportunity within this population. A 2024 industry report found that programs labeled "low-intensity," "functional," or "active aging" consistently attract more participants than those called "senior fitness" (12). These findings suggest rising demand and participation, though thoughtful program framing, instructor training, and accessibility remain essential to designing effective offerings for older adults. Particularly useful modalities for this population include resistance training to preserve strength, balance and mobility exercises to reduce fall risk, and low-impact cardiovascular activity to support heart health (13). To explore a related topic, see the September/October 2025 issue of *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal*® on "Power in the Older Adult" (www.acsm-healthfitness.org).

3. Exercise for Weight Management

About

Obesity affects 42.4% of U.S. adults, while approximately 49% report actively trying to manage their weight. Most commonly,

Figure 3. Top three fitness trends by age group.

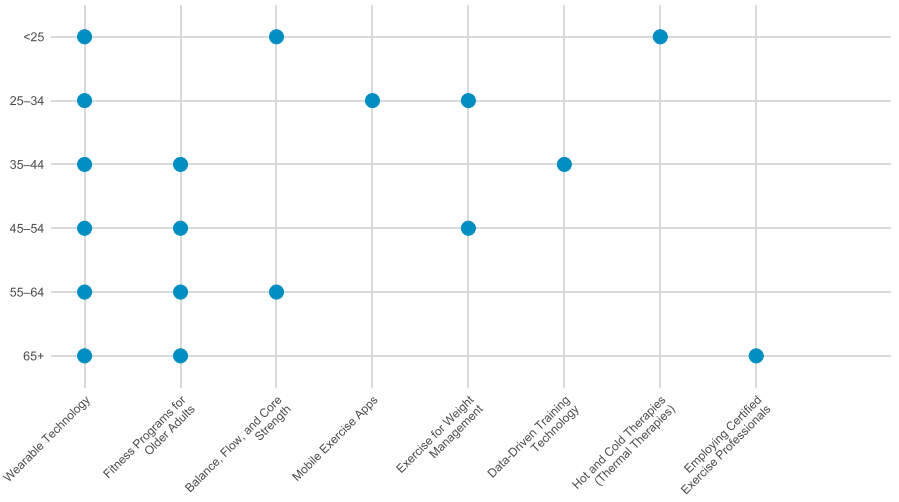
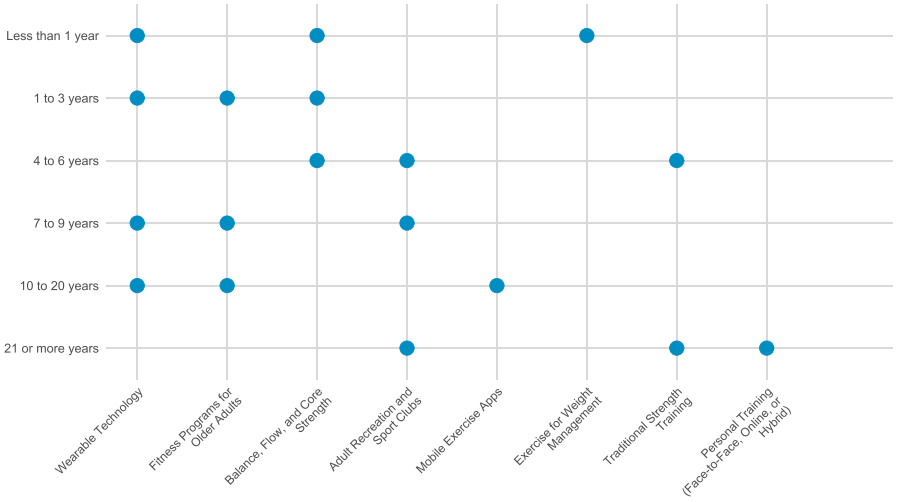


Figure 4. Top three fitness trends by years of experience.



individuals do so through exercise, dietary changes, or medications such as GLP-1 receptor agonists (14). As the use of obesity management medications increases, structured exercise remains essential for long-term success. It uniquely supports metabolic health, preserves lean mass, and improves physical function. These outcomes are not consistently observed with medication alone (15).

Survey Performance

Exercise for Weight Management ranks #3 for 2026, its highest position to date. It was ranked #4 in both 2025 and 2024, and #8 in 2023. The trend name was recently updated from "weight loss" to "weight management" to reflect a broader range of goals, including weight loss, maintenance, and gain.

Application

Exercise remains essential to long-term weight management by supporting lean mass, physical function, and metabolic health. Research shows that individuals who continue to exercise during pharmacologic treatment maintain greater fat loss after stopping medication than those using medication alone (15). Exercise professionals should consistently reinforce the unique role of exercise in sustainable weight outcomes and position themselves as trusted partners in this process. For guidance on program design and behavior change, see *Obesity and Weight Management: The Exercise Professional's Guide to Fitness Programming* (16).

4. Mobile Exercise Apps

About

Mobile Exercise Apps are digital platforms that deliver on-demand, scheduled, live-streamed, or recorded workouts, offering users convenience and flexibility to exercise anytime, anywhere. In 2024, more than 345 million people used fitness apps, generating more than 850 million downloads. Although usage and downloads peaked in 2021–2022, revenue has continued to rise as users maintain subscriptions (17). App users tend to be younger, female, college-educated, and living in urban areas, with lower adoption observed among older adults and individuals with limited digital literacy (4).

Survey Performance

Mobile Exercise Apps rank #4 in the 2026 Fitness Trends, down from #2 in 2025 but maintaining a strong position. The trend previously ranked #7 in 2024, reflecting ongoing demand.

Application

Mobile Exercise Apps can promote exercise adherence by offering convenience, structure, and self-monitoring tools. Research shows users value features that support goal setting and progress tracking, which may drive sustained engagement. Apps with habit-forming elements such as reminders, rewards, or social features may further support long-term use. Although short-term improvements in PA have been demonstrated, more research is needed to understand long-term outcomes (7,18). Exercise professionals can leverage apps as supplemental tools, particularly for clients who prefer flexible, tech-enabled fitness options.

5. Balance, Flow, and Core Strength

About

This category includes programs designed to improve core stability, muscular endurance, mobility, coordination, and motor control through disciplines such as yoga, Pilates, and barre. Participation in yoga, Pilates, and mobility-focused classes rose by 27% between 2022 and 2024, driven largely by suburban boutique studios (2). As fitness and wellness sectors continue to converge (19), this trend has emerged as a foundational element of balanced programming that supports both physical function and emotional well-being, reflecting a broader shift toward physical well-being, social connection, and mindfulness (20).

Survey Performance

Balance, Flow, and Core Strength ranks #5 for 2026, with strong performance across age groups and professional roles (Figures 2–4). After a pandemic-related dip in group participation, these formats have regained momentum alongside increased interest in holistic health and mind-body integration. In previous surveys, core training, yoga, and Pilates were listed separately but consistently ranked in the top 10 from 2007 to 2020. In 2026, this trend ranked highly among personal trainers and among respondents <25 and >55 years, highlighting its cross-generational appeal.

Application

This trend has been reframed as a key component of a balanced fitness regimen, bridging movement quality with mental well-being. Exercise professionals can integrate these formats to help clients improve posture, mobility, and core control, which

supports safer movement during strength and cardio training (21). Highlighting benefits such as improved movement control, injury prevention, and sustainable exercise habits can help broaden appeal and boost long-term retention across diverse client populations (21,22).

6. Exercise for Mental Health

About

Robust evidence supports the positive impact of PA on mental health, including improvements in mood, stress resilience, and body image. Evidence supports that both aerobic and resistance training significantly reduce depressive symptoms, with the greatest benefits in individuals with mild to moderate symptoms (22). While not a replacement for clinical treatment (*e.g.*, cognitive behavioral therapy), exercise offers a practical and scalable approach to improving mental health in both preventive and adjunctive contexts. Each year in the United States, more than one in five adults report experiencing mental illness, reinforcing the importance of movement-based strategies that support emotional well-being (23).

Survey Performance

Exercise for Mental Health ranks #6 in 2026, up from #8 in both 2025 and 2024. It placed in the top three for owners, program managers, and athletic trainers, reflecting broad recognition of mental health as a focus across diverse professions.

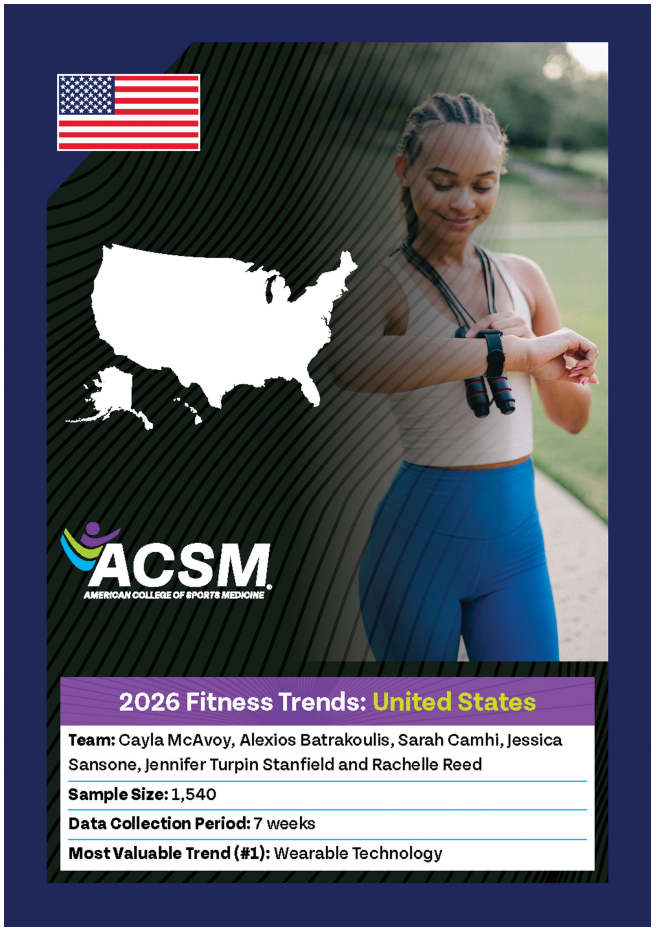
Application

One national survey found that 78% of exercisers cite mental or emotional well-being as their top reason for working out, ahead of physical fitness or appearance goals (24). However, many gyms and studios do not explicitly promote these outcomes. Exercise professionals can bridge this gap by using language like "stress relief," "mood boost," or "resilience," in marketing, client communication, and class instruction. Framing exercise around mental health benefits may better align programs with client motivations and support long-term engagement. Certain formats may be especially appropriate for supporting mental health outcomes: resistance training reduces depressive symptoms, while low-intensity, mindfulness-based formats such as yoga may offer additional value for stress reduction and emotional well-being (22).

7. Traditional Strength Training

About

Traditional strength training includes resistance exercises using free weights such as barbells, dumbbells, and kettlebells to improve muscular strength, endurance, and function. It is a key element of federal PA guidelines and plays an important role



in maintaining bone density, metabolic health, and mobility across the lifespan. Despite these benefits, fewer than 30% of U.S. adults meet the recommended guidelines for muscle-strengthening activity (13).

Survey Performance

This trend remains a consistent favorite, ranking in the top 10 for 17 of the past 20 years. In 2026, it ranked in the top three among exercise physiologists and among professionals with 21 or more years of experience.

Application

Exercise professionals can address existing participation gaps by offering strength training programs that are progressive, inclusive, and accessible to diverse populations. Messaging should emphasize long-term health benefits and functional outcomes, not just aesthetics or performance. To improve uptake, strength training can be integrated into group classes, low-cost programs, or hybrid formats that reduce intimidation and promote consistency.

8. Data-Driven Technology

About

This trend includes the use of real-time physiological data to individualize training, monitor recovery, and support long-term health. The emphasis is on how metrics such as heart rate variability (HRV), $\dot{V}O_{2max}$, sleep quality, and glucose levels are interpreted and applied to guide decisions. These insights allow professionals to adapt exercise programs based on metabolic and nervous system responses. In 2024, more than 70% of wearable users reported applying their output data to inform exercise or recovery strategies (25).

Survey Performance

Data-Driven Technology is down one spot from 2025 but remains firmly in the top 10. It earned a top three rank among strength and conditioning coaches, personal trainers, and respondents under age 45.

Application

Exercise professionals can use biofeedback to tailor intensity, assess readiness, and reduce risk of overtraining. A 2023 study found that athletes who used HRV-guided training improved performance and reduced injury rates compared to those using fixed programming (26). Regardless of fitness level, clients can benefit from personalized adjustments that align training with recovery status. Effective application requires translating raw data into actionable insights, communicating clearly with clients, and designing programs that align with individual goals and readiness.

9. Adult Recreation and Sport Clubs

About

Adult Recreation and Sport Clubs include community-based fitness groups (*e.g.*, running or cycling clubs) and recreational leagues for team sports such as basketball, soccer, or pickleball. These formats offer structured, social opportunities to be active outside traditional gym settings.

Survey Performance

New to the top 20 in 2026, this trend reflects growing interest in activities that combine fitness with fun, flexibility, and social connection. It ranked especially high among clinical exercise physiologists and medical professionals, suggesting expanding recognition of its value beyond traditional fitness audiences.

Application

By emphasizing enjoyment, camaraderie, and consistent participation, adult recreation and sport clubs may help reduce barriers to exercise and improve long-term adherence. Group-based formats can be particularly effective for adults who are otherwise inactive, especially those motivated by connection or casual competition (27). Exercise professionals can support participation by integrating recreation-based programs into their offerings, leading community groups, or collaborating with local leagues to reach adults who may not engage through traditional gym settings.

10. Functional Fitness Training

About

Functional Fitness Training includes strength, power, mobility, and endurance movements designed to improve physical performance

in real-world activities. This modality enhances balance, coordination, and overall movement efficiency, and its versatility makes it appropriate for youth, adults, and older populations alike. Programs often emphasize compound, multiplanar movements such as squats, lunges, and carries that transfer directly to daily life or sport.

Survey Performance

Functional Fitness Training ranks #10 in 2026, up from #12 in 2025. It has appeared in the top 20 every year since 2007, reflecting long-term relevance.

Application

Professionals can use functional training to improve joint stability, mobility, and sport-specific performance. Although often associated with older adults or injury rehabilitation, functional training also benefits athletic populations, as evidence shows improvements in strength, speed, power, and balance among athletes (21). Functional Fitness Training can be delivered with or without equipment and adapted to individual sessions, group formats, or hybrid models that prioritize movement efficiency and functional capacity over aesthetics or volume. Readers are referred to "Fitness is Function – A Synopsis of Functional Fitness Training and Traditional Strength Training," by Zachary A. Mang, Ph.D., in this issue, which highlights the synergistic benefits of combining traditional strength training with functional modalities to enhance peak performance, suggesting that integrated approaches between some top trends may offer a comprehensive approach to improving physical health and fitness.

11. Specialized Fitness Studios (Boutiques)

About

Specialized Fitness Studios offer focused, trainer-led experiences centered on specific modalities. Boutique offerings include cycling, rowing, group strength-based training, high-intensity interval training, Pilates, barre, and others, and they offer a curated alternative to larger gym settings. Connection is a major driver of long-term exercise adherence, according to the self-determination theory (28) and the built-in social support from the boutique community and trainer team can provide a personalized level of accountability to drive consistency.

Survey Performance

This trend rose to #11 in 2026, a notable increase compared to 2025, following a refined definition that emphasized coaching consistency, community, and single-modality programming rather than studio size or location.

Application

Exercise enjoyment is also a significant predictor of exercise engagement (28,29), and the built-in connection to music, workout milestone celebrations, and behavioral-based membership sales systems may contribute to a more engaging and motivating environment. Although they typically focus on a single mode of exercise, these studios can help clients meet PA guidelines in an approachable and socially supportive environment.

12. High-Intensity Interval Training

About

High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) involves alternating periods of high-effort activity (typically >85% of maximum heart rate) with lower intensity recovery periods (<65% HRmax). These intervals are repeated throughout the session and can be applied to a variety of aerobic exercises such as running, stair climbing, or cycling. HIIT is supported by a robust body of research as an effective training method for both healthy individuals and clinical populations (30).

Survey Performance

HIIT ranks #12 for 2026, down from #6 in 2025. It has appeared in the top 10 most years since its introduction to the survey, ranking #1 in both 2014 and 2018, and continues to be a widely endorsed training format across professional settings.

Application

HIIT is especially effective for time-constrained individuals, delivering comparable cardiometabolic benefits to moderate-intensity continuous training in less time (30). Its adaptability allows exercise professionals to implement it with minimal equipment in both in-person and remote formats. For example, HIIT can be structured as short intervals of cycling, stair climbing, or treadmill work at high effort, alternated with active recovery (30). Approaches that combine HIIT with resistance or mobility training can enhance overall fitness and are well suited for flexible delivery in gyms or remote settings using apps or wearable-supported guidance (17,18). When appropriately programmed, HIIT does not impair strength or hypertrophy gains and can be effectively combined with resistance training (30). To ensure safe and effective delivery, programming should be tailored to the client's fitness level, with careful progression of intensity, volume, and recovery intervals over time.

13. Group Fitness Classes

About

Instructor-led Group Fitness Classes offer a structured, motivating workout across formats like cardio dance, cycling, strength, yoga, and Pilates. Participation dipped during the pandemic but has since rebounded, especially in live, in-person settings. According to 2025 industry data, members who attend two or more classes per week are 50% more likely to stay engaged beyond their first year (12). Group fitness remains especially popular among younger adults, including Gen Z, who prefer social, instructor-led formats (31).

Survey Performance

Group Fitness Classes return to the top 20 for 2026 at #13 after falling off the list in 2019, mirroring the rebound seen with

Commercial/Multipurpose Gyms, which reappear at #19 after the same absence. This reflects renewed interest in structured, instructor-led formats as in-person participation continues to grow.

Application

The rebound in group fitness highlights its value for postpandemic engagement, combining structure, community, and accountability. As the industry balances traditional offerings with newer digital and wellness-focused trends, group classes can serve as a flexible format that supports hybrid delivery, integrates mental health or mobility elements, and strengthens long-term adherence. Exercise professionals can use this approach to align evolving client needs with proven strategies for retention, accountability, and connection.

14. Exercise for Chronic Disease Management

About

Chronic diseases are conditions that last 1 year or more, require ongoing medical care, and often limit daily activities. Examples include diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and arthritis. In the United States, an estimated 60% of adults are living with at least one chronic condition (23). While not all chronic diseases are curable, many can be managed to improve function, independence, and quality of life. PA is a cornerstone of both disease prevention and management (29).

Survey Performance

New to the top 20 for 2026, this trend reflects growing recognition of PA as a key strategy in chronic disease management across clinical and community settings.

Application

This ranking reflects growing support from healthcare organizations and policymakers to integrate PA into chronic disease care through referral systems and provider education (13,29). The opportunity to collaborate across the continuum of care means applying evidence-based protocols so exercise remains safe and aligned with medical guidance. Exercise professionals must know their scope of practice and refer clients to appropriate medical providers when needs exceed their qualifications. Clinical exercise physiologists lead medically supervised care, while other qualified exercise professionals support individuals with chronic conditions in community and fitness settings (11). Readers interested in evidence-based integration of PA in the management of chronic kidney disease are referred to the *Medical Report* column in this issue titled, "Exercise Training with Chronic Kidney Disease."

15. Employing Certified Exercise Professionals

About

Certified and qualified exercise professionals bring formal training in exercise science, program design, and injury prevention. They meet established competency standards through rigorous education and examination, ensuring safe and effective programming across diverse populations. Their presence helps uphold quality, safety, and professional standards in fitness settings. The U.S. Registry of Exercise Professionals™ (usreps.org) provides a national directory of certified professionals.

Survey Performance

Employing Certified Exercise Professionals ranks #15 for 2026, holding a steady mid-range position from previous years. In 2026, it ranked second among strength and sport performance coaches and third among respondents aged ≥65, underscoring the value placed on professional credentials in both high-performance and aging populations.

Application

Hiring certified professionals helps ensure that clients receive evidence-based programming, personalized support, and reduced risk of injury (32). In an industry shaped by social media, fitness influencers, and evolving technology, certified staff offer a safeguard against misinformation and help uphold professional standards. Their training signals a commitment to safety, continuing education, and ethical practice (33). Facilities that prioritize certified professionals can enhance credibility, reduce liability, and improve client outcomes. To explore ACSM's certification pathways, visit http://www.acsm.org/certification/get-certified.

16. Exercise in Physical Rehabilitation and Adaptive Training

About

Exercise in Physical Rehabilitation and Adaptive Training includes programs designed for individuals with mobility impairments, limb differences, paralysis, spinal cord injuries, stroke recovery, and other physical disabilities. These programs focus on functional movement, strength, and independence using progressive adaptations and assistive equipment. The American Therapeutic Recreation Association emphasizes PA as a core component of quality care in rehabilitation and habilitation services (34).

Survey Performance

Exercise in Physical Rehabilitation and Adaptive Training debuts at #16 for 2026. Its strong entry highlights broader efforts to make exercise more inclusive and aligned with individual needs.

Application

Recreational therapists and exercise professionals play a key role in designing programs that promote independence, functional strength, and quality of life for individuals with physical disabilities. To do this effectively, programs must include individualized adaptations, appropriate assistive equipment, and accessible environments. Collaboration across healthcare, rehabilitation, and fitness settings can enhance safety, support consistent care, and ensure that PA is inclusive, evidence-based, and person-centered.

17. Hot and Cold Therapies (Thermal Therapies)

About

Localized heat therapies, such as heat wraps or heating pads, can increase blood flow, promote relaxation, and help reduce muscle soreness (35). Whole-body heat exposure, including sauna use, temporarily elevates heart rate, cardiac output, and sweating, and has been linked to improved cardiometabolic outcomes and enhanced recovery when used consistently (36). Cold therapy may be applied locally through ice packs or systemically through cold plunges, cryotherapy, or cold showers. These interventions reduce skin, muscle, and core temperature, alter blood flow, reduce inflammation, and influence the endocrine response (37). However, emerging evidence suggests that cold water immersion may blunt the inflammatory signals necessary for strength adaptations, reinforcing the importance of personalized use based on individual training goals (38).

Survey Performance

Debuting at #20 in the 2025 trends list, Hot and Cold Therapies climbs to #17 this year, reflecting increased adoption of wellness- and recovery-focused modalities. This trend ranked highly among graduate students, dietitians, and adults under 25 years of age, highlighting growing interest in recovery strategies among younger and early-career professionals.

Application

While formal prescription guidelines for thermal therapies are still needed, exercise professionals should understand the physiological effects of thermal therapies to help clients use them safely and strategically. Proper integration may support recovery, adherence, and overall client satisfaction, particularly when tailored to the type, timing, and intensity of training.

18. Outdoor Fitness Activities

About

Outdoor fitness includes PA performed in natural environments such as parks, trails, beaches, and open water. Common activities include walking, hiking, cycling, kayaking, and paddleboarding. Green or outdoor exercise has been associated with improved mental health and stress reduction when compared to indoor activity (39,40).

Survey Performance

While down from its peak at #3 in 2021, the Outdoor Fitness Activities trend remains a strong presence several years after its pandemic-era surge.

Application

Outdoor fitness offers a low-cost, flexible approach to support PA. Exercise professionals can integrate outdoor sessions into community, clinical, or park-based offerings with minimal equipment or infrastructure. Program design should consider weather, terrain, and accessibility. Reminding participants of the mental and physical benefits of outdoor activity also may enhance motivation and long-term adherence.

19. Commercial/Multipurpose Gyms (Big Box)

About

This category includes large-scale gyms that typically offer affordable memberships, a wide range of equipment, group exercise spaces, recovery tools, and access to personal training. With multiple locations, they appeal to clients seeking self-guided, budget-friendly workouts and variety over specialization. In the United States, about 20% of adults hold a gym membership, and roughly 40% of those belong to large commercial chains (11). These facilities remain central to providing broad access to structured exercise.

Survey Performance

Commercial/Multipurpose Gyms return to the top 20 for the first time since 2019, reflecting renewed participation in onsite workouts following pandemic-related disruptions.

Application

Commercial gyms are well positioned to support a wide range of fitness behaviors, not just self-guided training. They can serve as a hub that complements other trends, including programs tailored to specific demographics and formats that are indoor, outdoor, online, or hybrid. By offering access to equipment, space, and certified staff, these facilities help bridge gaps in access and consistency. To improve engagement and retention, operators should provide orientation sessions, beginner classes, and flexible options for members who also train elsewhere or use digital platforms.

20. Youth Athletic Development

About

Youth Athletic Development emphasizes age-appropriate, skill-based programming designed to foster proper movement patterns before early sport specialization. Most models prioritize quality over quantity, aligning training with developmental readiness to support long-term athlete development. A central aim is to equip youth athletes with the technical, physical, and psychological foundation needed to progress through higher levels of competitive sport while minimizing injury risk (41).

Survey Performance

This trend dropped in 2026, down from #11 in 2025 and #9 in 2024. A related but distinct item surveyed this year was Youth Active-Lifestyle Building, which focused on early intervention and general PA promotion but did not rank in the top 20.

Application

Professionals working with youth athletes should deliver developmentally appropriate training that emphasizes movement quality, progressive skill development, and injury prevention.

Programs should account for maturational differences and avoid early specialization. The ACSM Youth Fitness Specialist Certificate offers foundational training for coaches, PE teachers, and exercise professionals working in schools, sports, or community settings: https://acsm.org/about/community-impact-programs/nyshsi/youth-fitness-specialist/.

Figures 2–4: Selected Trends Ranked by Profession/ Selected Trends Ranked by Experience (years)/Age

GLOBAL TRENDS COMPARISON

Since 2021, ACSM has partnered with international colleagues to implement the Fitness Trends Survey in countries and regions worldwide, contributing to a global trends outlook (42–44). Cross-sectional studies also have applied this methodology to examine leading health and fitness trends across individual countries and regions (45–50). For the 2026 global comparison, nine regions contributed data. Returning international partners include Australia (http://links.lww.com/FIT/A417), Iran (http://links.lww.com/FIT/A418), Portugal (http://links.lww.com/FIT/A419), Spain (http://links.lww.com/FIT/A420), Mexico (http://links.lww.com/FIT/A421), and the United States. New collaborators for 2026 are Taiwan (http://links.lww.com/FIT/A422), Poland (http://links.lww.com/FIT/A423), and Finland (http://links.lww.com/FIT/A424). For comprehensive overview of the global trends, please refer to the country- or region-specific graphics provided throughout this article. Each graphic incorporates a hyperlink that directs the reader to supplementary data provided by our international partners from each respective country or region. The top 10 fitness trends from each country can be found in Supplemental Table 2, http://links.lww.com/FIT/A416. This narrative highlights trends with potential global impact. Overall, international findings reflect a continued shift toward using exercise to improve health outcomes, support active aging, address obesity, and enhance mental health.

Fitness Programs for Older Adults ranked among the top 10 trends in several countries: Australia (#1), Taiwan (#1), Spain (#4), Portugal (#4), Poland (#13), Finland (#20), Iran (#20), and the United States (#2). These rankings highlight widespread recognition of the need to improve strength, mobility, and independence in aging populations. Similarly, Functional Fitness Training ranked in the top 10 in seven of nine regions, signaling strong global interest in training that supports real-world movement and quality of life. It was the top trend in Spain (#1) and a leading trend in Taiwan (#3), Finland (#6), Iran (#6), Mexico (#6), Australia (#11), and Portugal (#14). Traditional Strength Training also held a prominent position across regions, ranking as high as #2 in Iran and consistently within the top 10 in Mexico (#3), Australia (#4), Portugal (#6), and Finland (#6). Its sustained global presence suggests continued value for both health promotion and performance enhancement. Together, these three trends point to a shared international emphasis on preserving functional capacity and physical resilience across the lifespan.

Mental Health and Exercise ranked among the top 10 trends in Australia (#3), Portugal (#5), and Finland (#10), and remained visible in Mexico (#11) and Iran (#18), though it did not appear in Spain or Taiwan. This pattern suggests growing global recognition of exercise as a strategy for supporting psychological well-being. As this trend gains traction as a professional focus area, exercise professionals can access curated articles, practice tools, and CEC-approved course bundles through ACSM's Mental Health Resources site (51).

Personal Training continues to be a prominent trend across multiple regions, suggesting a sustained emphasis on customized fitness regimens and individualized coaching. It was identified as a top trend in Portugal (#2), Spain (#3), Taiwan (#5), Iran (#7), Finland (#13), and Australia (#14), but did not appear in Mexico's top 20. Employing Certified Exercise Professionals ranked in the top 20 in Portugal (#1), Australia (#9), Mexico (#9), Iran (#10), Taiwan (#12), and Spain (#14), and ranked #15 in the United States. While credentialing practices differ by region, this trend reflects a shared emphasis on qualified instruction to ensure safety, effectiveness, and client trust. However, a persistent gap remains between expectations set by employers and professional organizations and the actual qualifications of those delivering exercise services. This concern is especially relevant as fitness facilities increasingly serve older adults and individuals with medically managed chronic conditions. Guidelines from national and international health organizations call for qualified professionals to tailor PA to individual needs and ensure safety across populations (13,29). Strengthening pathways to certification and enforcing credential standards may be necessary to meet evolving public health demands and protect consumers.

Exercise for Weight Management ranks among the top trends globally (#1 in Iran and Mexico, #6 in Spain, #8 in Australia, #10 in Taiwan, and #11 in Portugal). These results mirror findings from the 2025 survey and reinforce the widespread public health concern regarding obesity. Importantly, the consistent placement of this trend across regions suggests that exercise is viewed as a key component of global strategies to address obesity and related chronic conditions such as type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and cardiovascular disease. When Traditional Strength Training, which ranked among the top trends in most regions, is combined with Functional Fitness Training programs led by credentialed professionals, it offers a safe, effective, and enjoyable real-world exercise approach for promoting health and fitness benefits among individuals with overweight and obesity (16).

The 2026 survey indicates broader global adoption of wearable technology (#1 trend in the United States) by exercise professionals compared to 2025, though regional variation remains (1). This year, wearable technology appears among the top 10 trends in Finland (#1), Poland (#3), Taiwan (#4), Mexico (#5), Australia (#5), Spain (#7), Iran (#8), and Portugal (#16). Mobile Exercise Apps (#4 in the United States) also show promise globally, ranking among the top 20 in Poland (#7), Finland (#11), and Mexico (#19). Digital technology constitutes a substantial and growing financial market, yet its influence may differ between exercise professionals

and consumers. The evolution of wearable devices now extends beyond basic fitness tracking to include broader health monitoring, entertainment, gaming, and aesthetic design features, such as stylish bands and smart jewelry. Consumer rankings may offer a distinct global lens on the perceived value of digital tools for enhancing health and fitness. At the same time, economic constraints may limit access to wearable technologies in certain regions (52).

LIMITATIONS

The annual trends survey is widely recognized by exercise professionals worldwide as a credible tool for identifying future directions in the fitness industry. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, despite intentional and broad outreach, the overall response rate remains below the 20% benchmark typical in survey-based research. While efforts were made to broaden representation across credentialing organizations and professional roles, most respondents held ACSM certifications. This may limit perspectives from professionals credentialed through other bodies or working in regions where ACSM has less reach. To help contextualize the rankings and expand the overall lens of applicability, "The Employer Perspective: Insights and Practical Applications of the 2026 Fitness Trends," by Rachelle Reed, Ph.D., M.S., ACSM-EP; A'Naja M. Newsome, Ph.D., ACSM-CEP, EIM; Jennifer Turpin Stanfield, M.A., ACSM-EP, EIM; and Cayla R. McAvoy, Ph.D., M.S., ACSM-EP, EIM, in this issue provides additional insight from professionals across varied sectors in the fitness industry.

Second, trend rankings reflect professional perception and can be shaped by factors such as marketing, visibility, and personal relevance. Finally, not all international collaborators followed identical ACSM survey protocols. Some regions modified trend lists or definitions to reflect local context. Language translation, cultural variation (including policy), and sampling differences also may have influenced rankings. Even so, these region-specific insights offer valuable perspective and help illustrate broader global shifts.

Despite these limitations, the survey continues to offer a useful snapshot of evolving professional priorities across the health and fitness landscape. To enhance its value in future years, efforts should focus on increasing response rates, diversifying respondent demographics, and refining trend definitions for greater clarity and consistency across global settings.

SUMMARY

ACSM's 2026 Fitness Trends Survey commemorates 20 years of tracking practitioner-led insights, highlighting how the fitness landscape has transformed over the past two decades. It captures both the priorities of the profession and the evolving needs of the communities it serves, standing as a trusted resource for programming innovation, workforce development, and strategic direction in alignment with real-world demand.

This year's results reflect a continued shift toward digitally integrated and personalized fitness programming, with increased attention to social inclusion and whole-person wellness. Further, themes of individualization, integration, and accessibility emerge across categories, enabled by technology-forward solutions and professional standards that support safe and inclusive service delivery.

Wearable Technology remains the top-ranked trend in the United States, while tools such as Mobile Exercise Apps (#4) and Data-Driven Technology (#8) have become foundational to modern practice. These technologies enable individualization, enhance communication, and expand access across in-person and virtual formats. In parallel, survey findings highlight the expanding role of exercise in both health promotion and clinical care. Trends such as Exercise for Mental Health (#6) and Exercise for Chronic Disease Management (#14) point to a broader emphasis on prevention, whole-person wellness, and the integration of fitness into the healthcare continuum.

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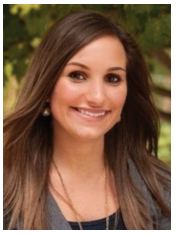
Cayla R. McAvoy, Ph.D., M.S., ACSM-EP, EIM, *earned her Ph.D. in Public Health Sciences from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, her M.S. in Exercise Physiology from the University of Central Florida, and her B.S. in Kinesiology from Indiana University. Her work focuses on physical activity measurement and exercise as preventive medicine, with a specialization in mixed-methods data collection. As a registered yoga teacher (200 hour) and educational presenter for the National Exercise Trainers Association, she also brings practical experience in behavior change and mind-body movement. Cayla currently works as a contracted evaluator for the Florida Department of Health and chairs ACSM's Trends Workgroup.*

Alexios Batrakoulis, Ph.D., FACSM, ACSM-EP, ACSM-CPT, EIM, CSCS*D, *is an adjunct professor in the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science at the Democritus University of Thrace, Greece, and a global fitness educator as the founder of the International Obesity Exercise Training Institute. Dr. Batrakoulis currently serves on the NSCA Board of Directors (personal trainer representative) and has served on numerous ACSM and NSCA committees. He also was named the 2018 IDEA Personal Trainer of the Year, 2019 IDEA China Fitness Innovator, 2020 NSCA Personal Trainer of the Year, 2021 PFP Trainer of the Year, and 2022 ACSM Certified Professional of the Year. He has contributed to more than 90 international peer-reviewed publications on exercise, including research articles, textbook chapters, and books. He serves as the international representative for ACSM's Trends Workgroup.*

Sarah M. Camhi, Ph.D., FACSM, ACSM-EP, EIM, FAHA, *is a professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of San Francisco. Professor Camhi's training as a clinical exercise physiologist and physical activity epidemiologist has given her a unique perspective on examining the associations between lifestyle behaviors, obesity, and cardiometabolic risk across the lifespan. She is currently serving on the ACSM Health & Science Policy Committee and the Research Review Committee, and has previously served on the ACSM Pronouncements Committee, the Exercise is Medicine® Education Committee, a mentor in ACSM's Mentoring Women to Fellowship Program, and a member-at-large of the New England and Southwest ACSM Regional chapters. She serves as a content expert for ACSM's Trends Workgroup.*

Jessica (Sudock) Sansone, Ph.D., M.S., ACSM-EP, EIM, *earned her B.S. in Exercise Science and Health Promotion from Central Connecticut State University in 2015. She earned her M.S. and Ph.D. in Exercise Physiology, respectively, from Springfield College. She is a former Division I athlete and is currently an associate professor in the Department of Exercise Science at Shenandoah University. She is a member of ACSM's Office of Museum, History, and Archives, the CCRB Executive Council, and chair of the CCRB Certified Personal Trainer Committee. She is an ACSM Certified Exercise Physiologist and is Exercise is Medicine® credentialed. Her research interests include hydration and strength training for performing athletes. She serves as the CCRB representative for ACSM's Trends Workgroup.*

Jennifer Turpin Stanfield, M.A., ACSM-EP, EIM, *is an assistant professor in the Health & Human Performance program at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. She holds a master's degree in Health & Exercise Science and a bachelor's degree in Strategic Communication, both from The Ohio State University (OSU), and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Kinesiology – Health & Exercise Science at OSU. Her work investigates factors that influence health disparities in physical activity participation. In addition to her teaching appointment and work with ACSM, Jennifer is a subject matter expert for the American Council on Exercise, a workshop presenter for the National Exercise Trainers Association, and a continuing education provider for Yoga Alliance. She serves as a content expert for ACSM's Trends Workgroup.*



Rachelle Reed, Ph.D., M.S., ACSM-EP, *holds a B.A., M.S., and Ph.D. in exercise physiology, completed postdoctoral training in exercise psychology, and also is an ACSM Certified Exercise Physiologist. Rachelle chairs the ACSM CCRB Continuing Professional Education Committee and also serves as the employer representative for ACSM's Trends Workgroup. Currently the head of scientific research and science communication at Therabody®, she works as an industry scientist, bridging the gap between wellness and research spaces.*

Congrats 2026 Worldwide Survey of Fitness Trends Prize Winners

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) randomly selected prize winners from all who participated in the 20th annual Worldwide Survey of Fitness Trends. Here's what the winners said.

"I am so grateful and thankful to receive this prize. Sacred Heart University (my undergrad) highly values ACSM, shout out to my professors, this is because of you! Now, beginning graduate school, I constantly rely on ACSM!"
Sara Bojorque, Boston, MA
Winner of $100 gift card

"I am honored to be selected. I really appreciate ACSM's commitment to advancing health and fitness through research and education."
Lin-Sheng Chen, Manhattan, KS
Winner of *ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription*, 12th edition

"The Worldwide Survey of Fitness Trends was straightforward and took less time than expected, and I won a book! Thank you for a great experience!"
Shawn Cradit, Raleigh, NC
Winner of *ACSM's Nutrition for Exercise Science*, 2nd edition

"It's truly an honor to be selected as a prize winner by ACSM. I deeply value ACSM's commitment to advancing the science and practice of exercise. Participating in the survey was a meaningful way to contribute to the future of health and fitness."
Terence Moriarty, Waterloo, IA
Winner of *ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription*, 12th edition

"Being selected as a prize winner is exciting! Having an opportunity to add to my selection of professional resources is a bonus!"
Heather Wauls, Lansdale, PA
Winner of *ACSM's Nutrition for Exercise Science*, 2nd edition

"It is an honor to receive such a gift from ACSM. I plan to utilize the materials to continue to grow so that I can serve our sheriff's office as the fitness and wellness deputy."
Mark Raley, Amarillo, TX
Winner of *ACSM's Nutrition for Exercise Science*, 2nd edition

"What a surprise to win an ACSM book. It is great to have these current references at my fingertips. I have long used *ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription* as a resource for my own books, and in planning research protocols."
Melinda Manore, Corvallis, OR
Winner of *ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription*, 12th edition

"I always look forward to reading the results of ACSM's Worldwide Survey of Fitness Trends to stay up on the latest trends in the industry. To take part in the survey is an honor and to be selected as one of the drawing winners is a wonderful gift. Thank you ACSM!"
Andy Retberg, Hudsonville, MI
Winner of *ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription*, 12th edition

"I will enjoy my new ACSM book. This will help me continue giving the best in fitness programming to the clients I serve."
Ciara Simone, Sandy Springs, GA
Winner of *ACSM's Career and Business Guide for Fitness Professionals*

"I appreciate ACSM giving the opportunity to provide insight into current trends in the industry. I am honored to be chosen as a prize winner for the survey. Thank you!"
Jim Couillard, Lewis Center, OH
Winner of *ACSM's Career and Business Guide for Fitness Professionals*