

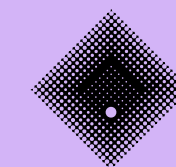


POWERING PARTICIPATION:

Insights on menstruation support needed for people with disability in sport



share*the***dignity**



**VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY**

MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

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A Joint Effort



As Founder of Share the Dignity, I have long advocated for menstrual equity — but this report makes clear that people with disability who menstruate are being systematically excluded from sport. The barriers identified are not incidental; they are the result of gaps in design, infrastructure, policy, and a fundamental lack of education. Without clear, accessible information for participants, coaches, and support networks, confidence and participation cannot improve. This demands more than awareness — it requires coordinated action. Governments, sporting bodies, and industry must work together to ensure access to appropriate products, inclusive facilities, education, and clear support pathways so that participation in sport is truly equitable.

Rochelle Courtenay

Share the Dignity Founder and Managing Director



Thank you to the Advisory Pilot Group and to everyone who completed the survey, your experiences and insights shaped this Guide. The findings reveal urgent, unacceptable gaps and provide evidence that demands action. I encourage you to read, learn, and act. There are clear opportunities for government, sport and recreation organisations, disability providers, and period product suppliers to improve support, including accessible online guidance on managing periods for people with disability participating in sport, promoting funding available for adaptive menstrual products, educating coaches to make periods a normative conversation, providing accessible bathroom cubicles with a shelf, and designing adaptive, comfortable period products.

Professor Clare Hanlon

Project lead, Institute of Health and Sport, Victoria University

*“No one should be excluded from participating in sport **due to menstruation**”*

Why the Need?

Our initial groundbreaking research¹ showed most respondents skipped sport due to their periods (68%) and believed access to period products removed a barrier to participating in sport (58%), highlighting the need for freely accessible period products in sporting environments.

However, with data showing that only 12% of women with disability participate in sport², there was a need to expand our initial research; Does menstruation prevent people with disability from participating in sport? What support is needed to assist people with disability, who menstruate, to participate in sport? The aim of this guide is to provide evidence-based insights to address these two questions.

Build Knowledge

Stimulate Opportunities

Create Impact

1. Hanlon, C., Flowers, E., Mesagno, C., & Share the Dignity. (April 2025). Bloody good idea: Free period products at sport and leisure facilities. Victoria University. <https://www.sharethedignity.org.au/periods-and-sport-education>

2. Clearinghouse for Sport (June 2025). Participation – 2024. <https://www.ausport.gov.au/clearinghouse/evidence/persons-with-disability-and-sport>



Pathway to the Insights



Co-created survey.

To build knowledge, a survey was co-created and piloted over a three-month consultation period, with people with disability who are and are not active in sport, who menstruate, and were aged between 16 and 56 years.



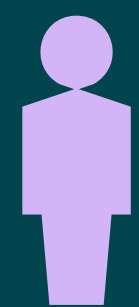
Respondent recruitment.

People with disability, who menstruate, were sourced through member networks from sport and recreation, government agencies, disability service providers, nonprofit organisations, Share the Dignity, and Victoria University. The aim was to reach a diverse sample with varying experiences related to periods and sports participation.

Our Respondents

Insights were gained from 273 respondents across Australia between the ages of 15-53 years.

273
RESPONDENTS



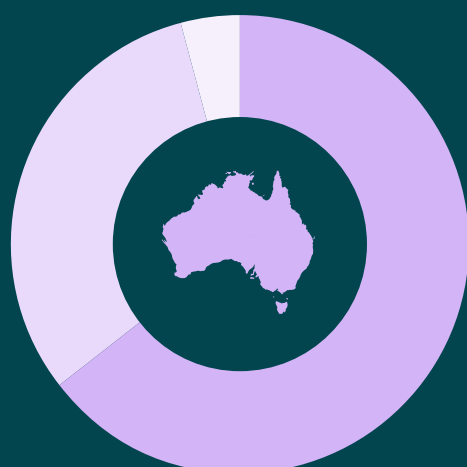
15 – 53
YEARS OLD

Average age

32
YEARS

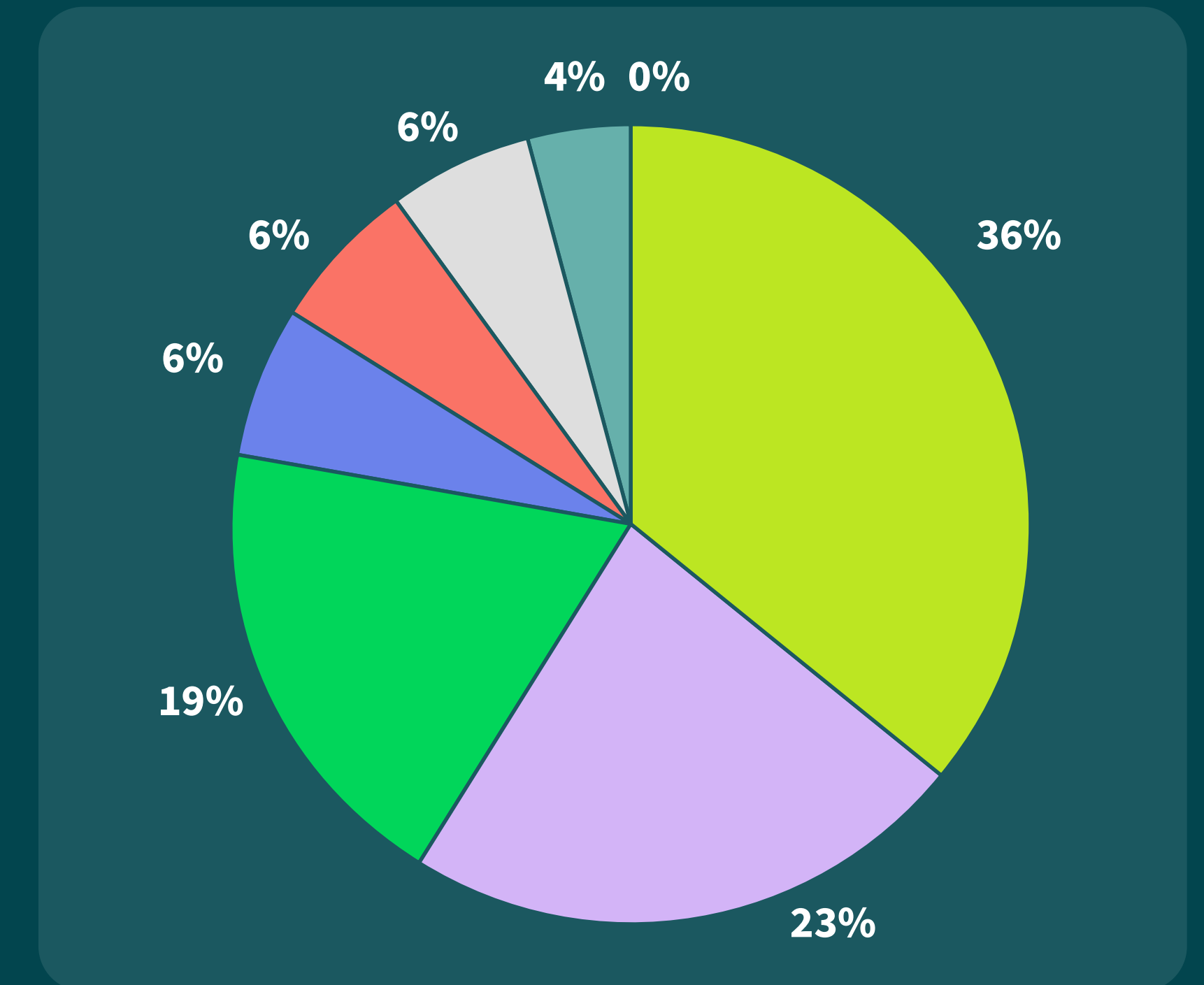


- 67% reported both parents were born in Australia
- 19% had one parent born overseas
- 14% had both parents born overseas



- Metropolitan cities (64%)
- Regional centres (31%)
- Rural towns (4%)

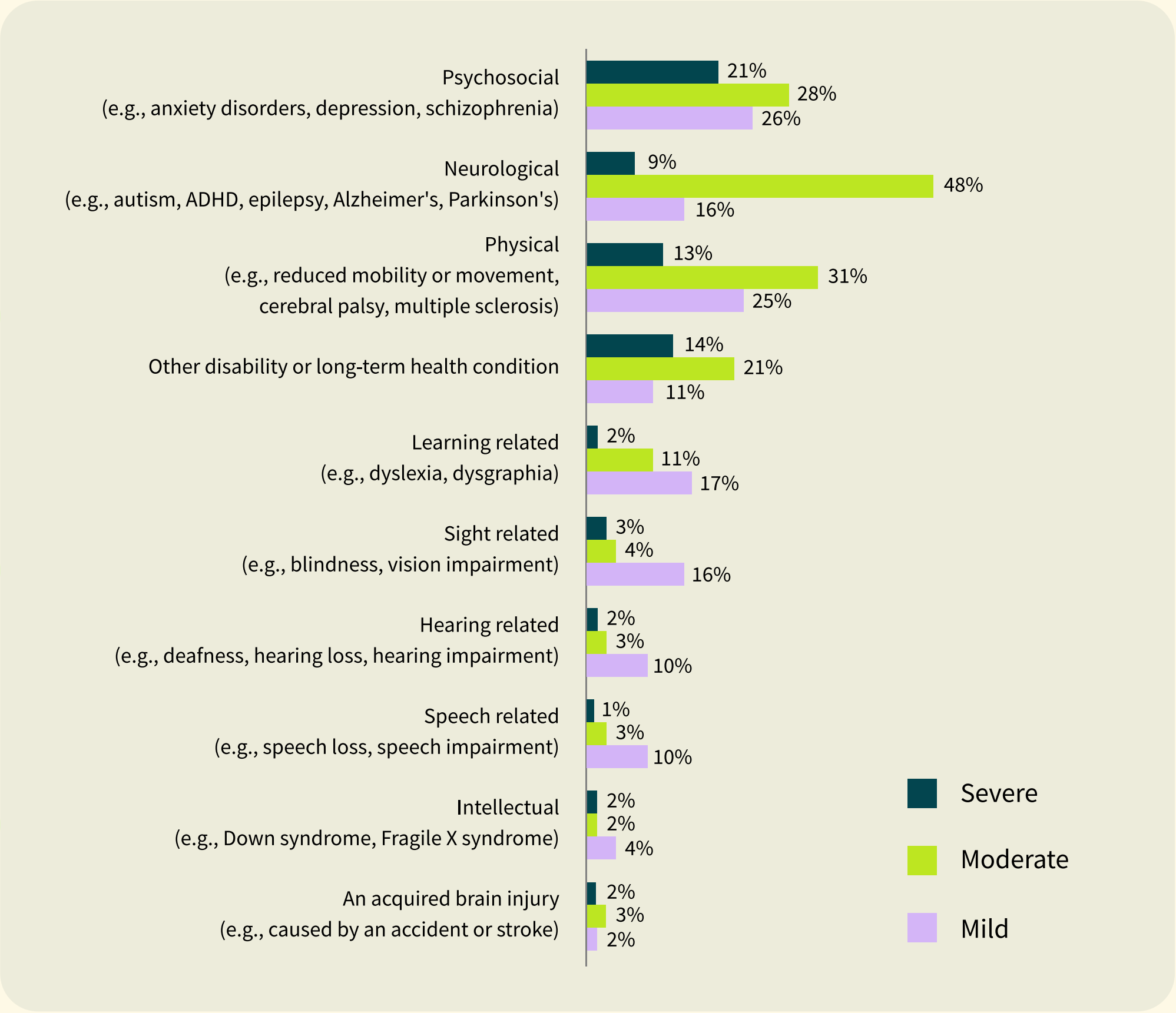
The highest representation came from **Victoria (36%)**, followed by **Queensland (23%)**.



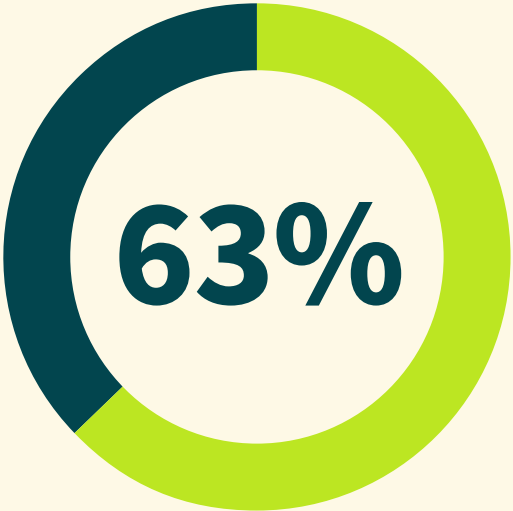
- Victoria
- Queensland
- New South Wales
- South Australia
- Tasmania
- Western Australia
- Australian Capital Territory
- Northern Territory

Disability status

Psychosocial, neurological, and physical conditions were the most reported disability, affecting over 69% of respondents. Neurological, ‘moderate’ severity, was the most concentrated with 48%.

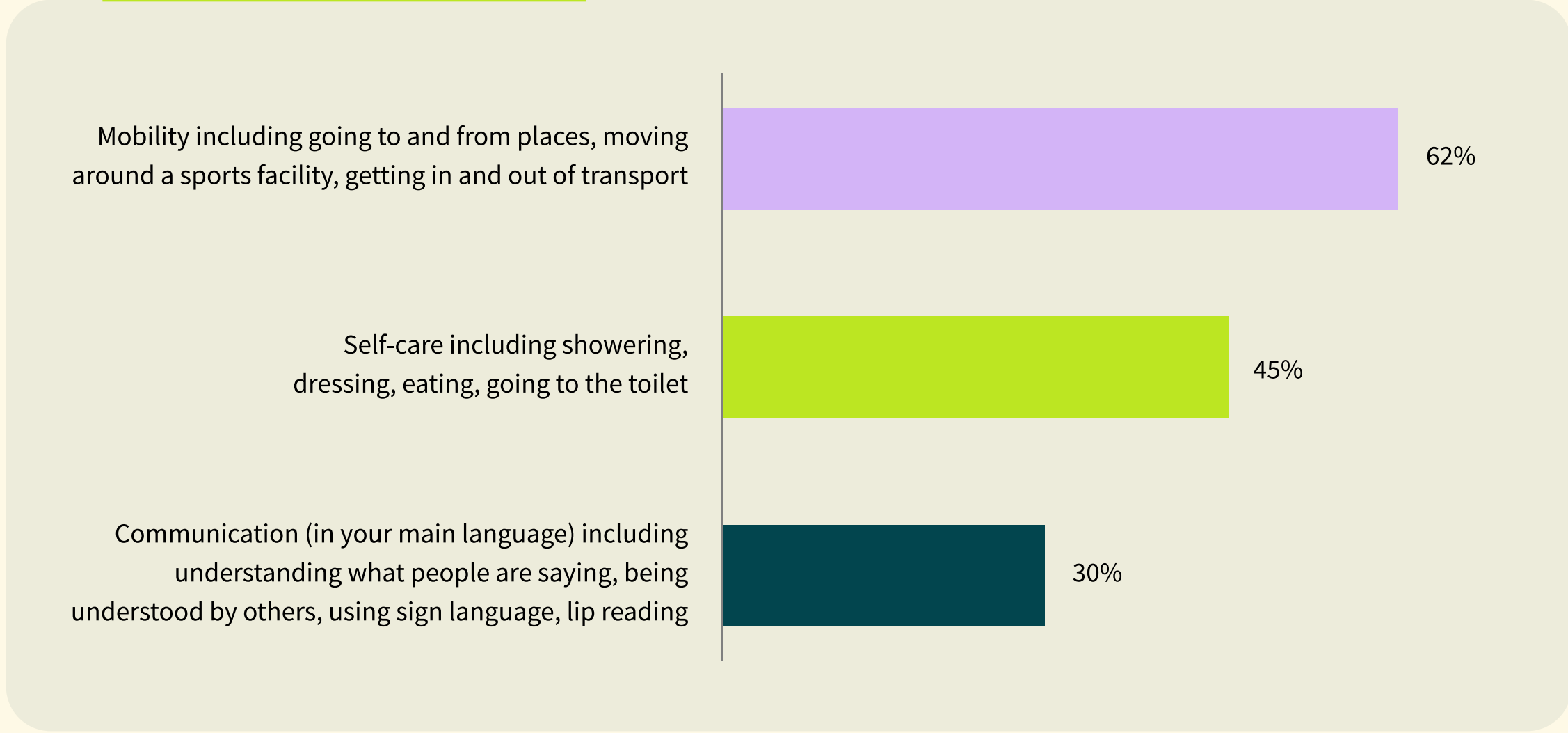


Approximately half (53%) indicated their disability was present at birth, and for **acquired disability (47%)**, the average age of onset was **21 years old**.



Most (63%) respondents believe that strangers would not recognise them as a person with disability.

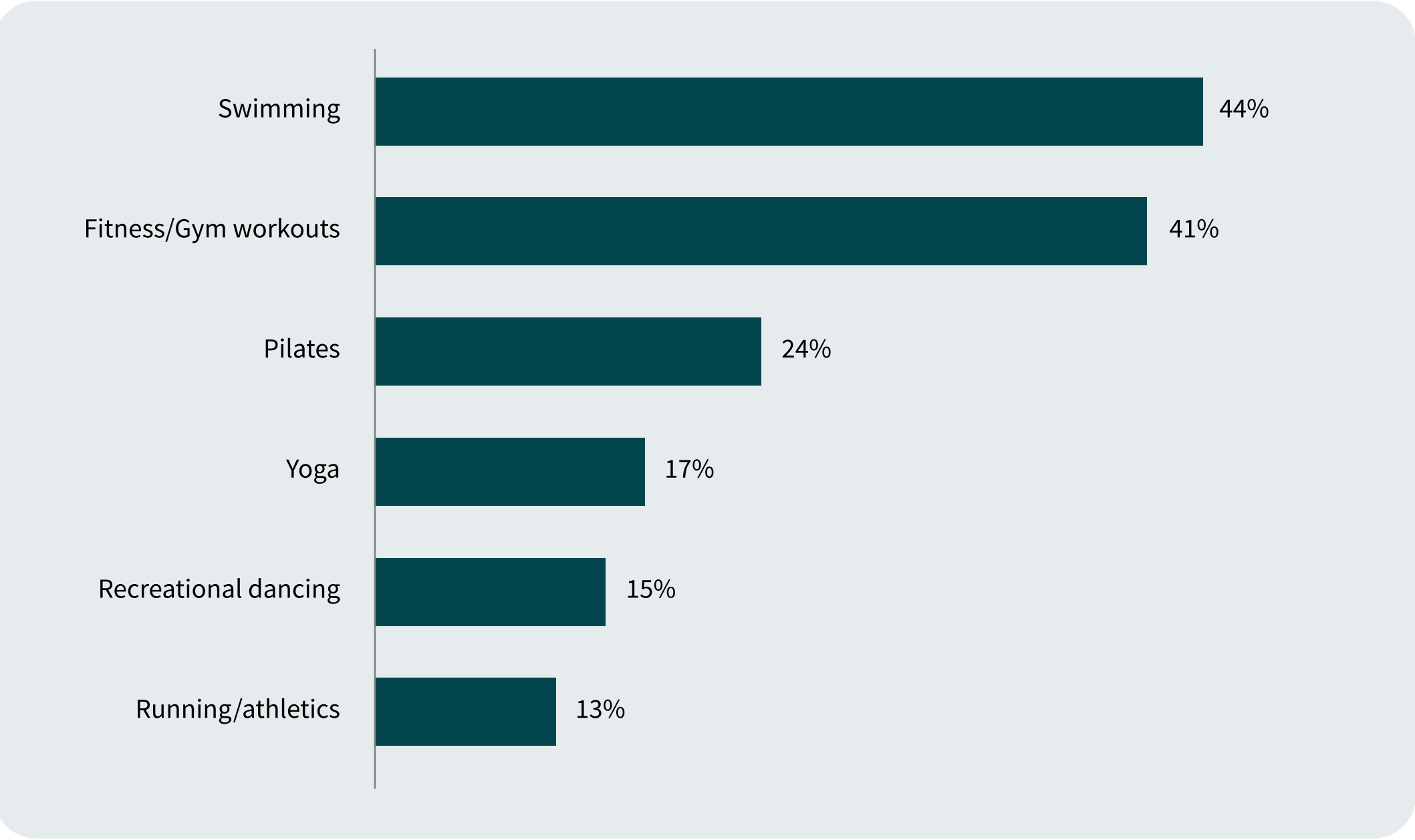
Assistance required:



Sport participation

ACTIVE GROUP

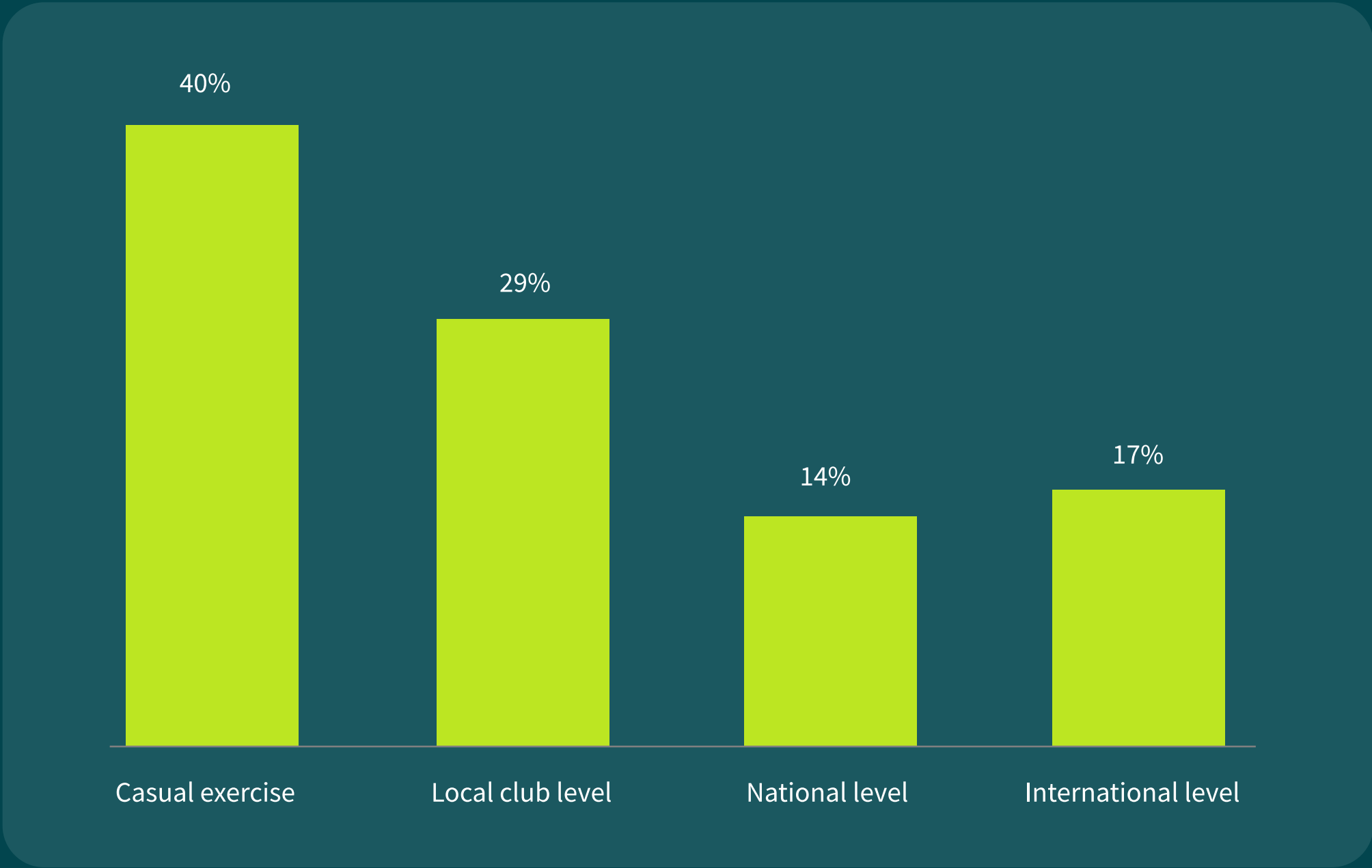
Most common activities include:



Most (81%) regularly engage in sport and/or physical activities (active group)

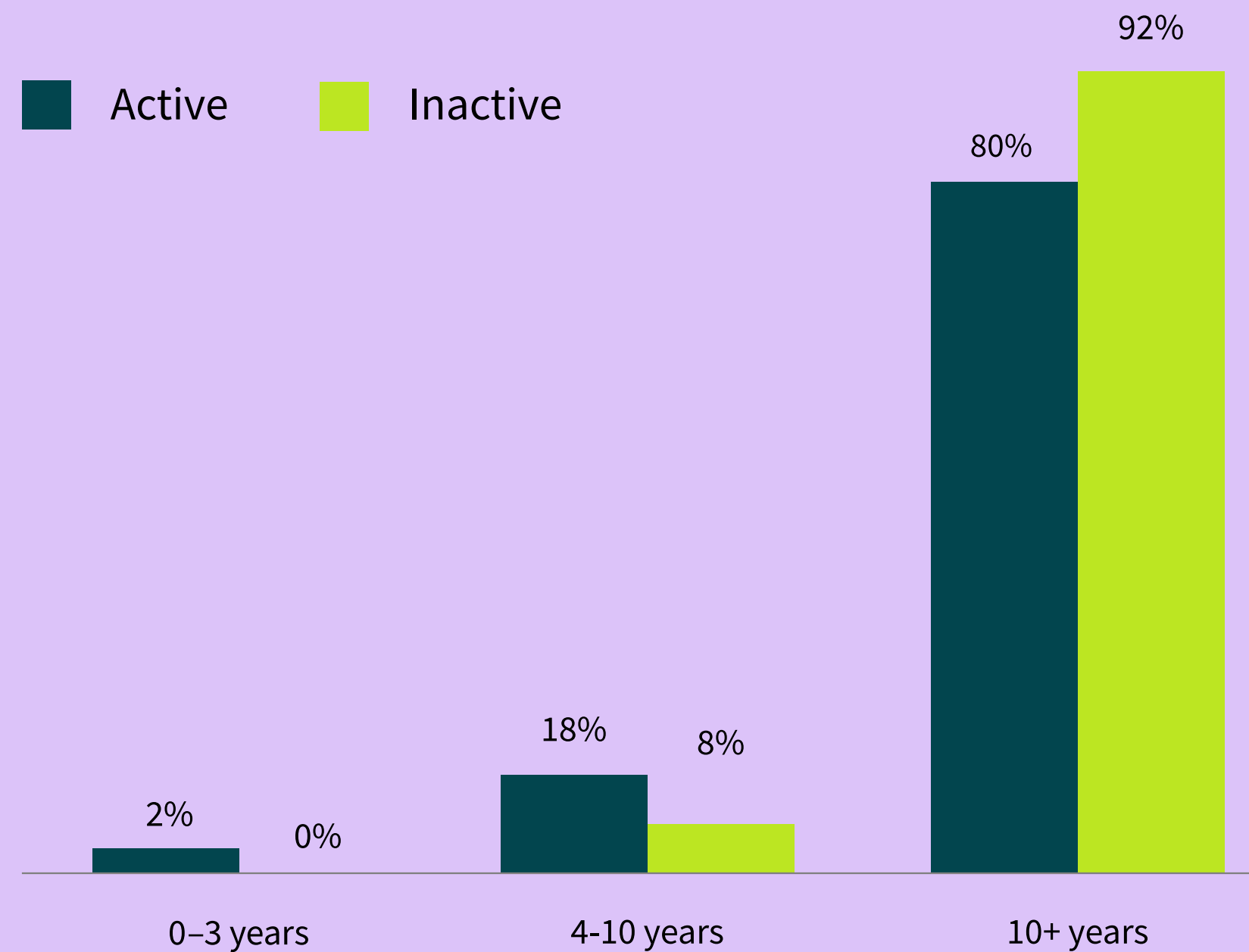
Compared with 19% who do not (inactive group).

The participation level varied from casual exercise to competing internationally.

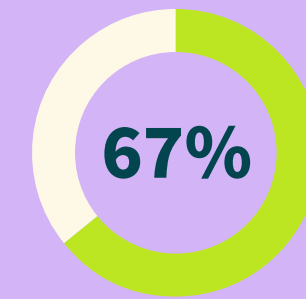


Uncovering the Facts

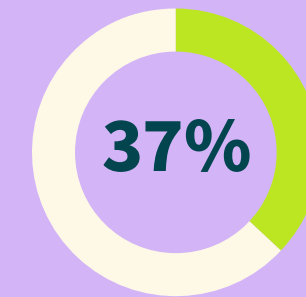
Most respondents have managed their menstrual cycles for over a decade.



ACTIVE GROUP

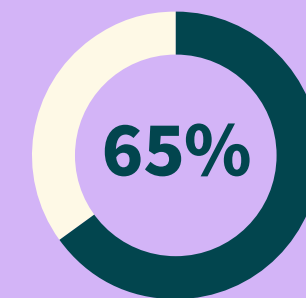


Most (**67%**) skipped participating in sport because of their period.

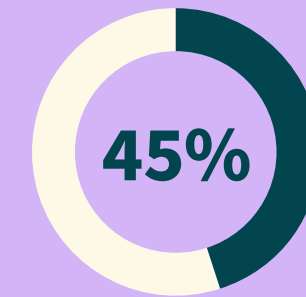


Over one-third (**37%**) skipped participating in sport because they did not have the period products needed.

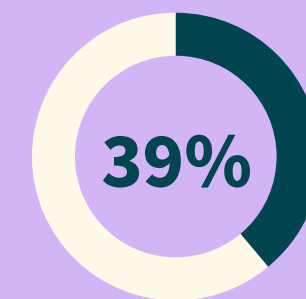
INACTIVE GROUP



Most (**65%**) did not participate in sport because of their period.

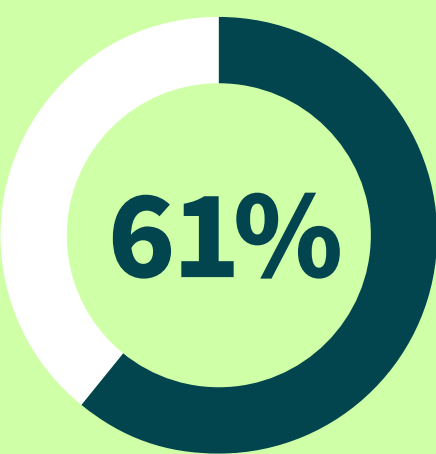


Nearly half (**45%**) recognised period products as a reason for not participating in sport.

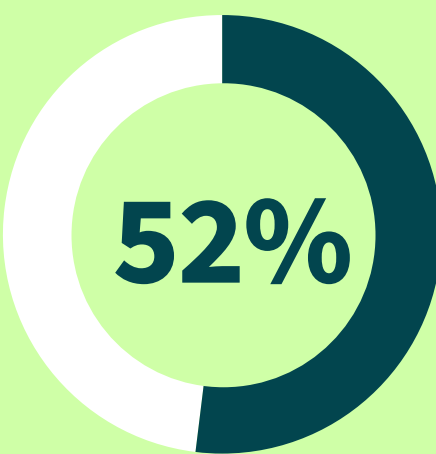


Over one-third (**39%**) would consider participating in sport if they received support to access appropriate period products.

Communication and education

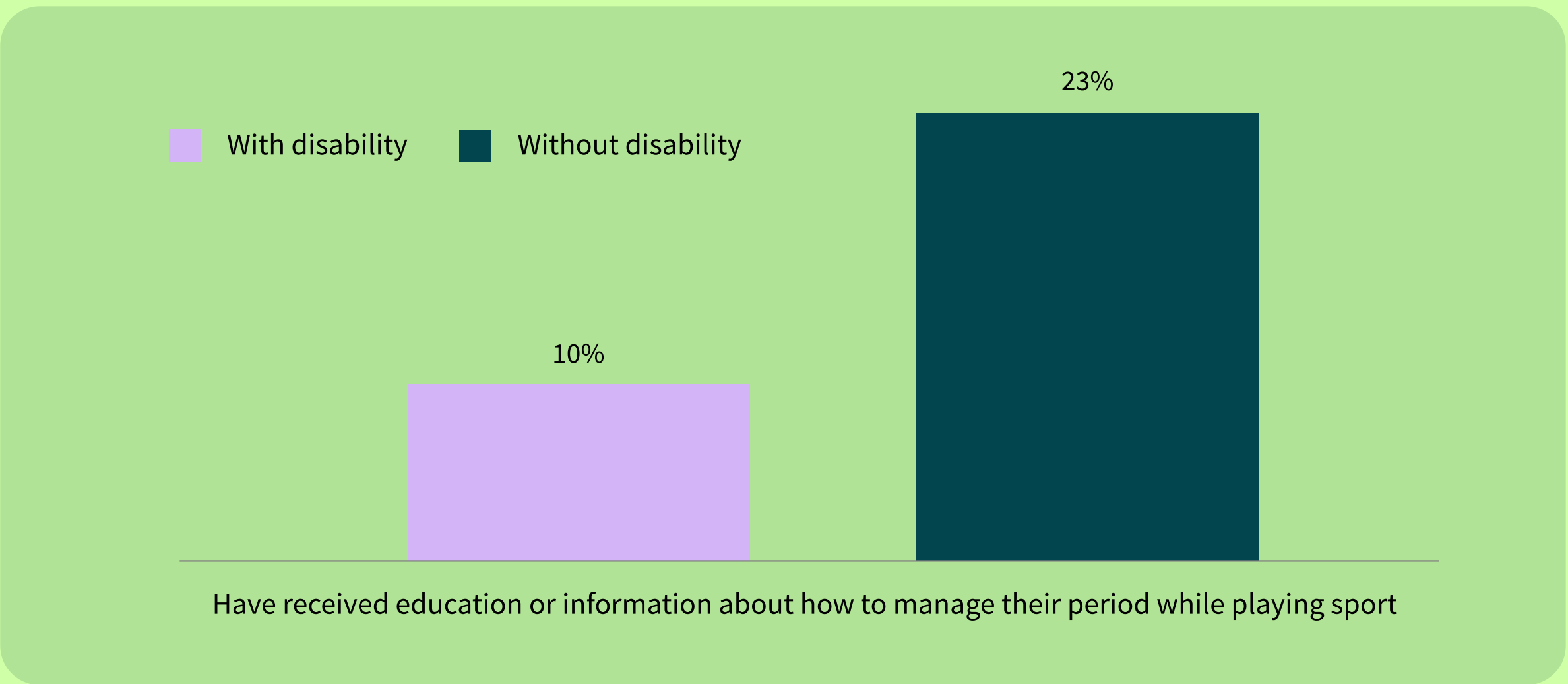


Most **(61%)** are unsure if staff would be supportive of discussing participant period needs.

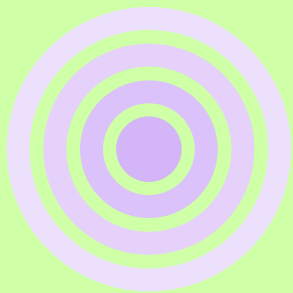


Most **(52%)** want to be educated about the menstrual cycle and its potential effects when participating in sport with a disability.

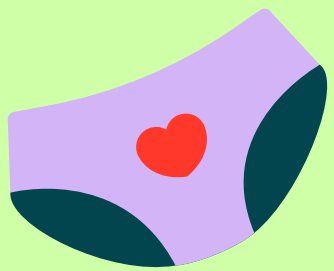
Active group: A significant education gap exists between active people with disability, and our earlier research on people without disability¹, on how to manage their period while participating in sport.



Education topics participants recommended include:



The body and performance: how menstruation interacts with specific disability, affects pain levels and fatigue, and overall athletic performance.



Practical product knowledge and accessibility: knowing what period products are available when participating in sport e.g., adaptive option including period swimwear or seamless underwear and logistical advice on managing hygiene at public sports facilities.



Normalising conversation: guidance on how to communicate with coaches (especially male coaches), and educate coaches on how they communicate about managing periods to participants with disability.

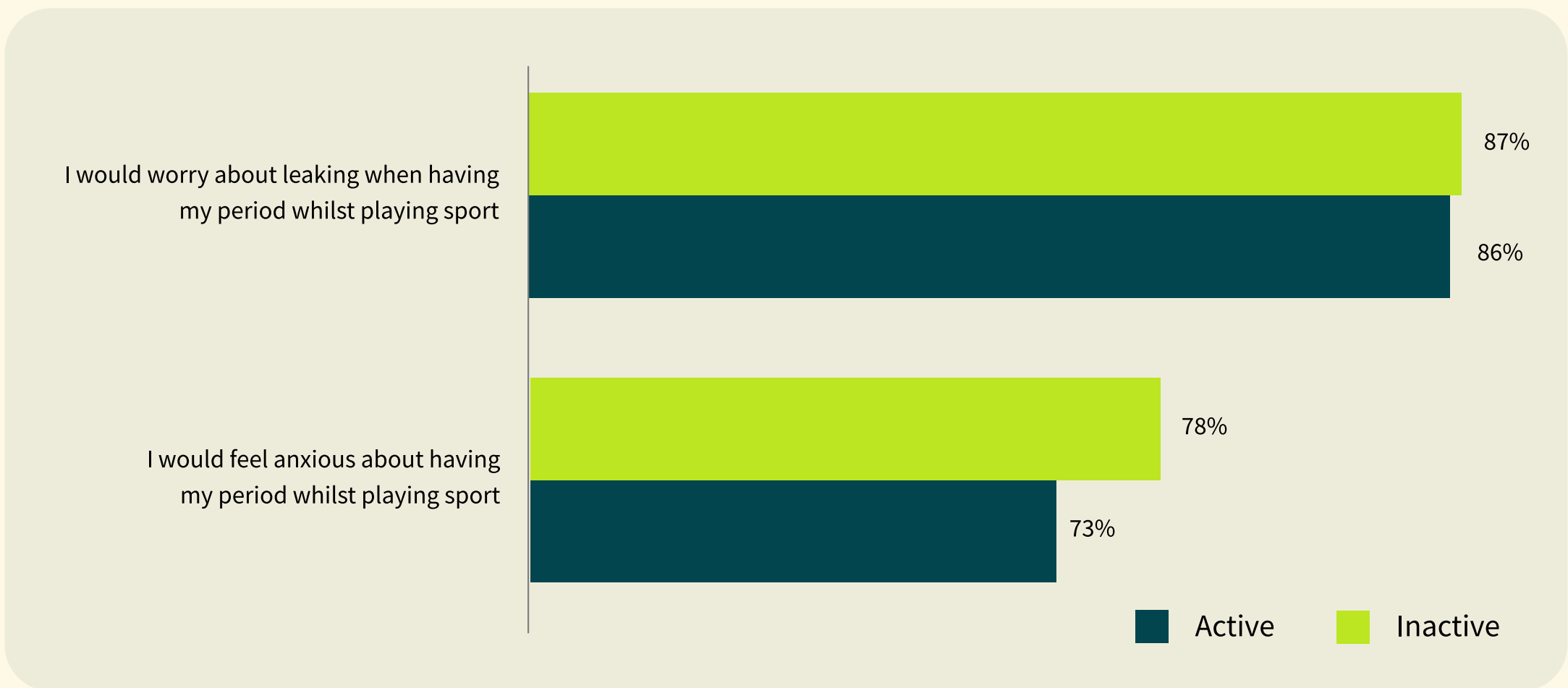
“Education and tips on what products work for specific sports, and how to change period products and dispose of them or store them until they can be cleaned.”

The education delivery method is critical as disability needs vary e.g., people with cognitive challenges want visual accessible formats to support functioning in high-sensory sporting environments.

Period anxiety when participating in sport

Period anxiety is a key issue across the active and inactive groups when having their period and participating in sport.

* The majority worry about leaking and feel anxious when having their period and if participating in sport.



* Active group: Individuals were confident managing their periods at home (81%) compared to sporting facilities (27%) or workplace/school (33%).

Confidence boosters

The discovery and use of specific, reliable products provided peace of mind and often eliminated the need for frequent changes during activities.

“Use of menstrual cups has been a game changer for me. I have used them for 10 years with very little issue. These have improved hygiene and peace of mind while competing.”

“I use period underwear which is a lifesaver for me as the heavy use is helpful for sports.”

Confidence in period management was built over years of personal experience, knowing one’s body, and being prepared with routines, emergency supplies, and pain medication.

“I always have to be prepared with everything I could possibly need before I leave the house. I have an emergency medication kit in my bag, and this includes sanitary products.”





Anxiety exacerbators

The physical state of sport facilities:

- ▶ Lack of privacy
- ▶ Unsanitary conditions
- ▶ Missing sanitary bins inside accessible toilets
- ▶ Absence of tables or shelves in accessible toilets
- ▶ Physical spaces not accommodating mobility aids



“Change areas and bathroom stalls are usually dirty or do not have sufficient space. I need access to a table or shelf to increase my independence in changing my products.”

Fear of leaking through menstrual products due to unpredictable or heavy flow, or reduced physical sensation.

“Due to the heavy nature of my periods from endometriosis, and having no sensation below my mid-abdominal region, I’m unable to tell when flooding occurs. I can be in a sports wheelchair for up to three hours without a change.”

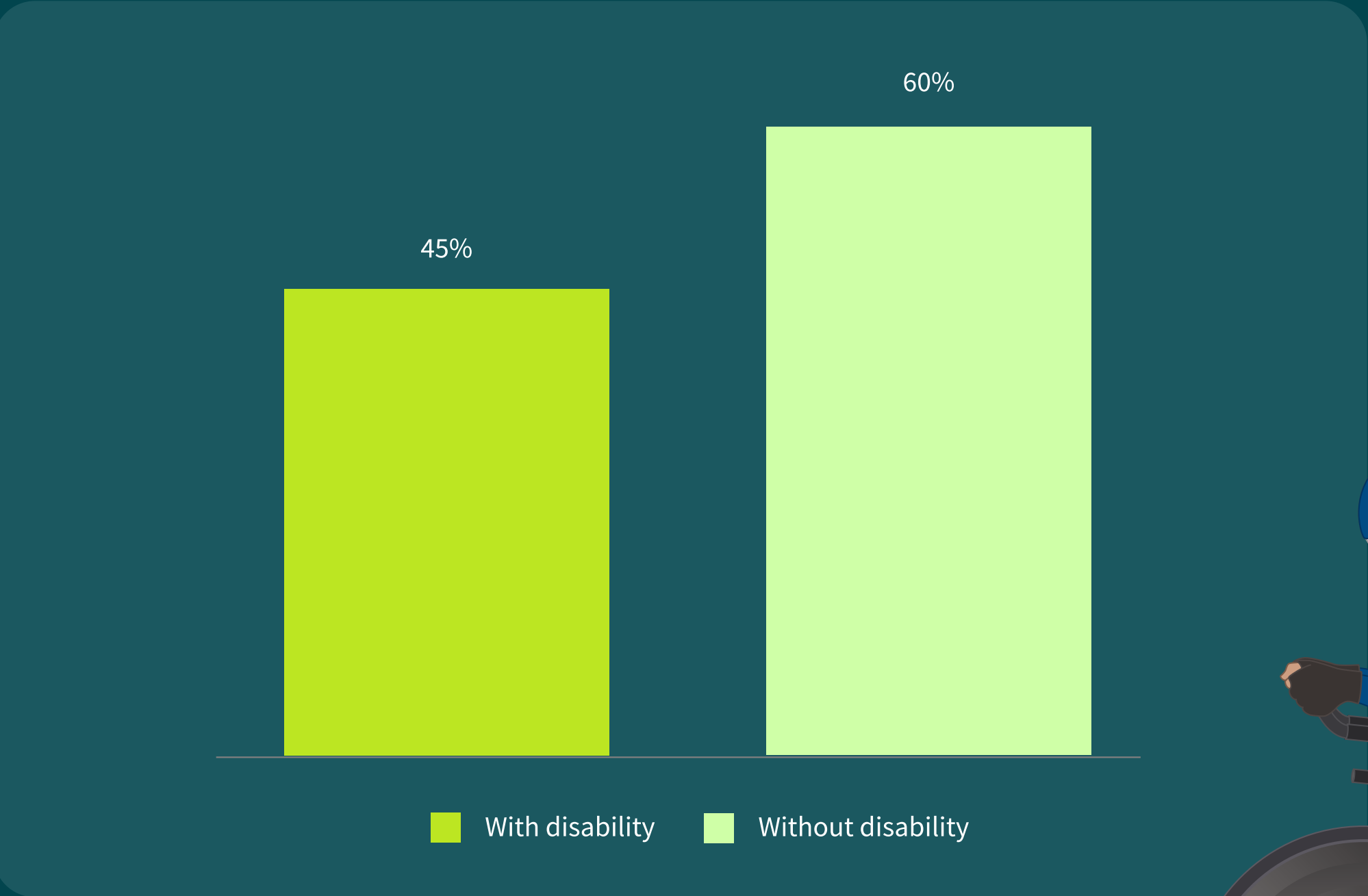
Busy, noisy and unfamiliar sports environments can intensify sensory challenges, particularly for those with neurodivergent conditions.

“I forget about my self-care when I’m distracted in high sensory environments. I often need reminders to change period products as I will forget and not tune into my body.”

Sport Facilities

ACTIVE GROUP

Compared to our earlier study on people without disability¹, fewer people with disability change their period product at a sport facility.

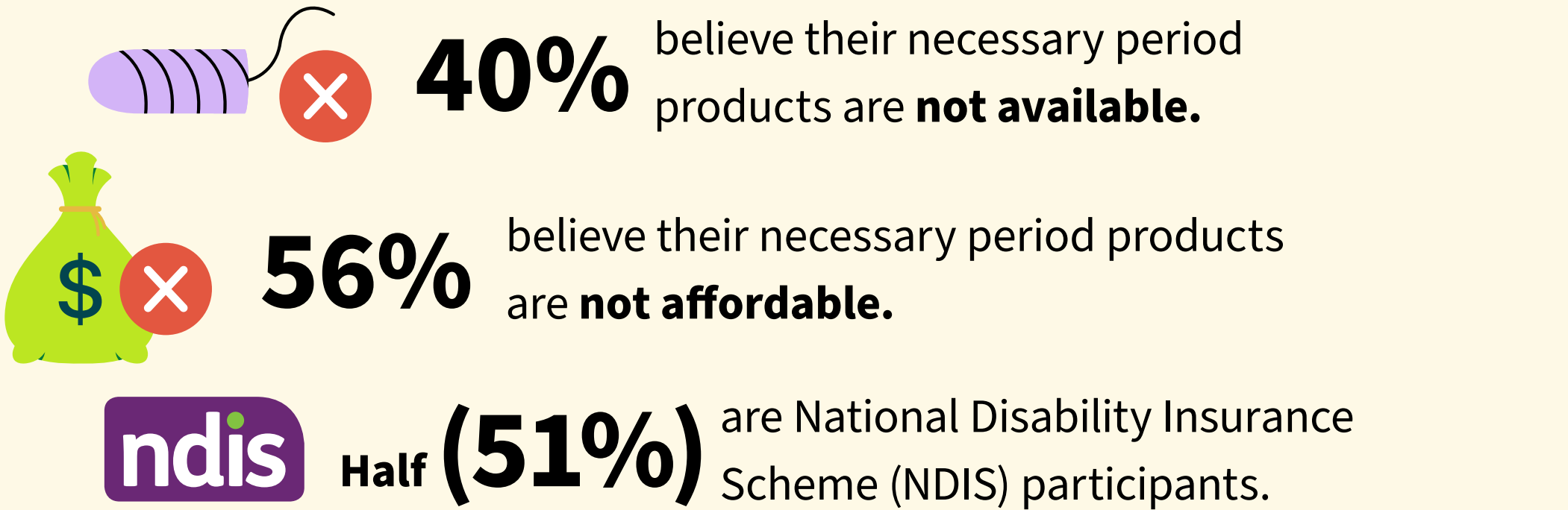


“It’s difficult with my assistance dog present, the floor is dirty, I can’t have her sit or lie down.”



Accessible period products to participate in sport

ACTIVE GROUP



***Nearly three-quarters (71%) of these NDIS participants were unaware** the scheme provides support for modified or adaptive products to manage menstruation, such as applicators and period underwear, and **90%** of those noted that knowing this support exists would encourage them to continue participation in sport.

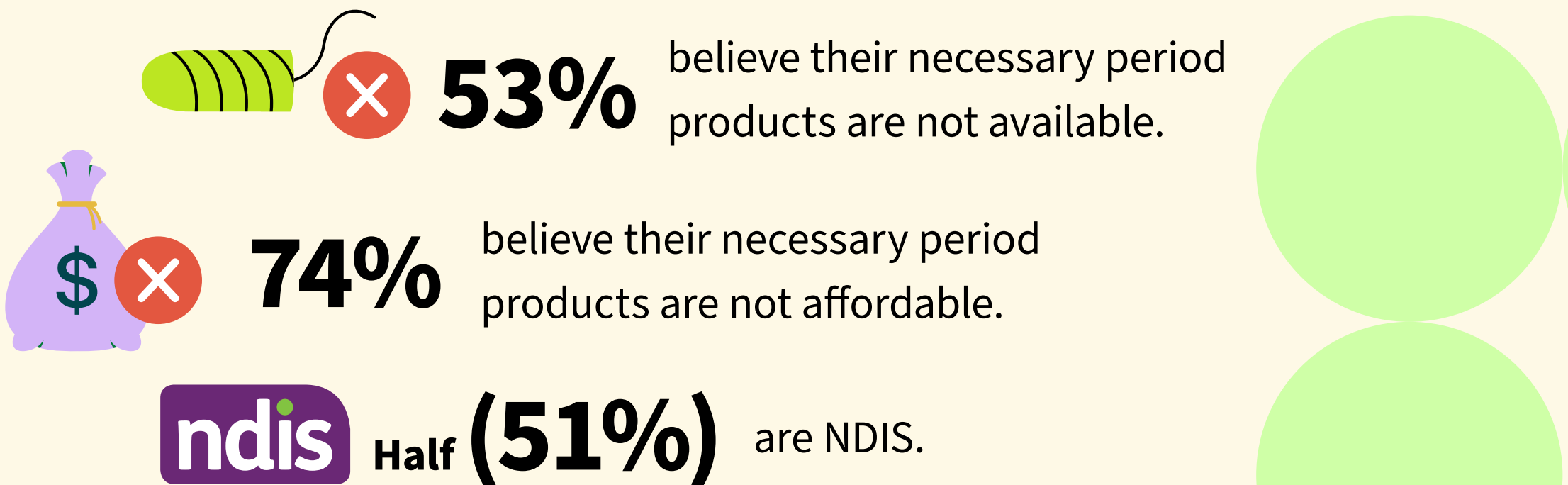
*Those who were aware of this NDIS support, 55% reported that it helps them continue participating in sport.

For others, despite the potential availability of NDIS support for period products, restrictive eligibility rules have prevented them from securing funding for essential adaptive items, including period products that enable them to participate in sport.

“My mum requested period underwear from the NDIS planner, and she said I could only get them if I was in a wheelchair...and an OT needs to help me overcome my need for period underwear.”

Outside of the NDIS system, only 5% received support for period products needed to participate in sport.

INACTIVE GROUP



***Over three-quarters (81%) of these NDIS participants were unaware** the scheme provides support for modified or adaptive products to manage menstruation, and **30%** of those reported that learning about this available assistance would increase their likelihood of taking up a sport.

Period product needs

The period product needs varied between the active and inactive group, if individuals were to participate in sport.

ACTIVE GROUP

Single-use pads, tampons, and adaptive period underwear were the most popular.

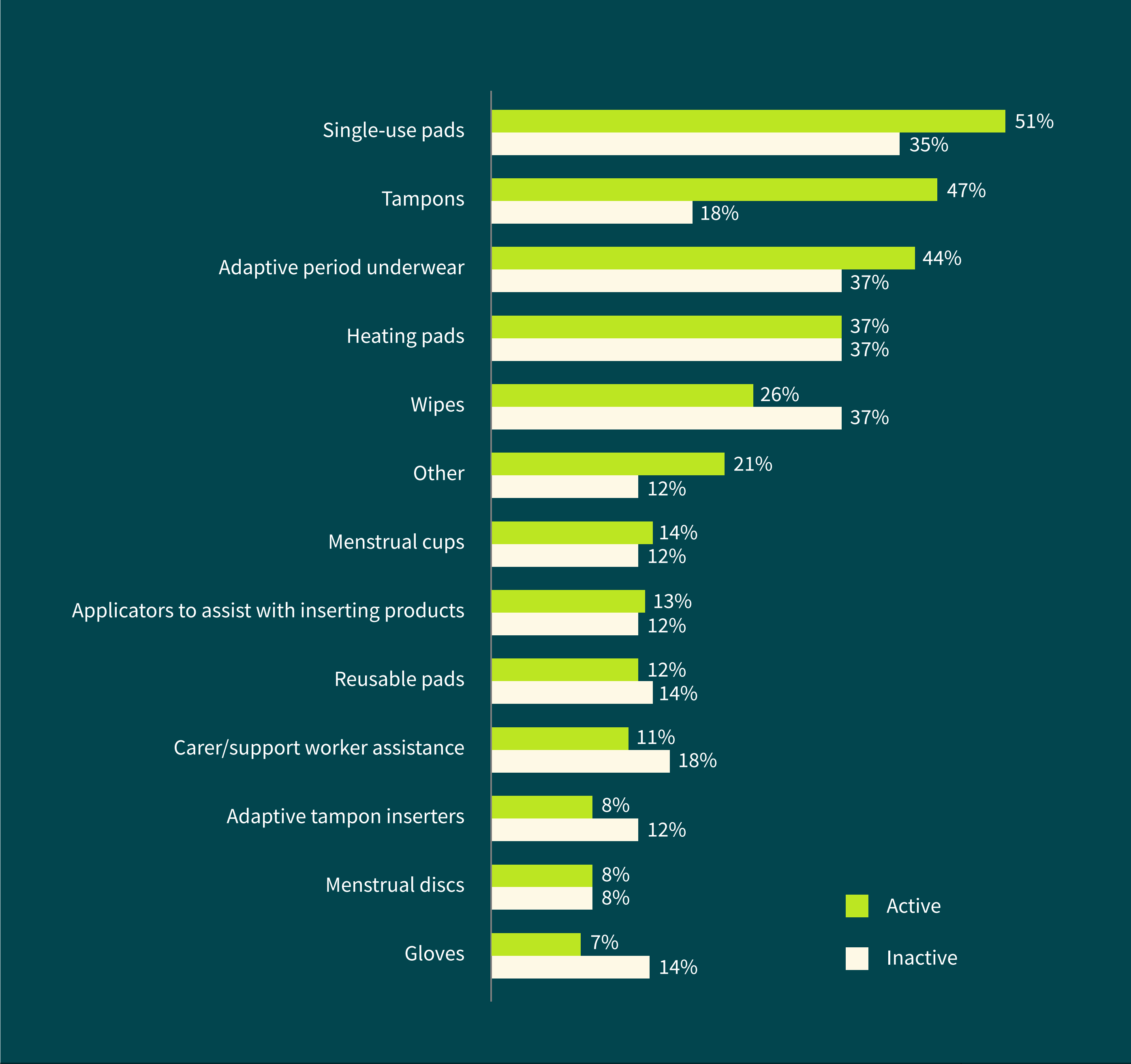
INACTIVE GROUP

Adaptive period underwear, heating pads, and wipes were the most popular, if they were to participate in sport.

Findings reveal the disability type can affect what period products participants can safely and comfortably use when participating in sport:

*Individuals with physical disability, fine motor challenges, limited range of motion, or the inability to stand/squat often cannot use internal products e.g. tampons and menstrual cups and instead rely on external products e.g. pads or period underwear.

“My hands don’t function well, and it’s been many years since cups and tampons have been a functional option for me.”



*Individuals who are autistic or neurodivergent, tend to find the sensation of internal products, or the “crinkling” and wetness of disposable pads, intolerable. Period underwear is frequently preferred for comfort, but cognitive challenges can make remembering to change products difficult.

“Sensory issues are the biggest influence - how things feel can make or break my focus when playing sport.”

*Individuals who are paraplegia or have amputations, pelvic floor dysfunction, connective tissue disorders, paraplegic, or spinal/nerve issues, may experience difficulties with internal period products from positioning correctly or staying in place, often making insertion or wear extremely painful.

“Wearing tampons puts pressure on nerves ...and can be incredibly painful. My leg causes my pelvis to shear and sit out of place so that confounds on endo pains.”

Swimming

Many participants who cannot physically or sensorily tolerate tampons or menstrual cups, feel excluded from swimming during menstruation, unless they have access to specialised (and often expensive) period swimwear.

“I can’t swim whilst I have my period. I can only use pads, so this limits what activities I can and can’t do.”



Improving the design of period products

Standard period products used when participating in sport frequently failed to meet the needs of people with disability:

- ▶ **Lack of appropriate options.**
Participants managing conditions like endometriosis or adenomyosis often rely on products marketed for “maternity use”, which can cause discomfort and become visible under sporting attire.
- ▶ **Product improvements.**
Suggestions include period underwear that is “non-bulky and unobvious” and have loops on the sides to help pull them up, currently “the tabs that pull off the stickers on pads are hard to grab hold of”.

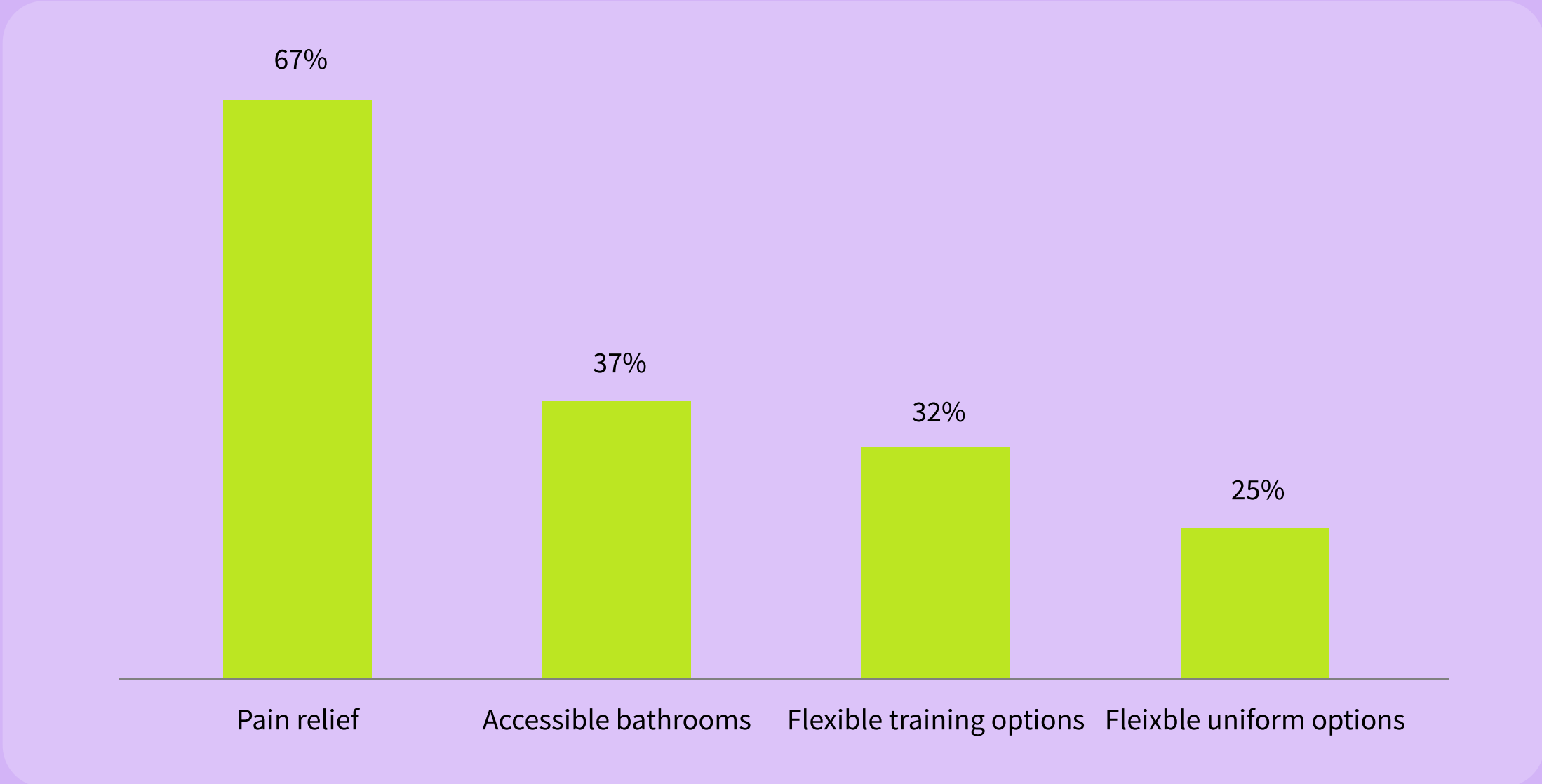




Managing periods beyond period products

ACTIVE GROUP

In addition to period products, most (67%) needed pain relief and/or sport infrastructure, policy or practice support.



“In equestrian we wear tight white breeches. Period underwear as an extra layer of protection, neutral colours are hard to find and not cheap. Anxiety about leakage is real and not conducive towards focusing on your performance.”

Opportunities

Empowering people with disability, who menstruate, to start or stay engaged in sport, requires targeted action across the sport and recreation, government, and disability sectors, as well as period product suppliers. The lived experiences captured through this research highlight opportunities for providers to dismantle existing barriers and create environments where participation is accessible, supported, and sustainable.

To assist reduce the worry and anxiety about menstruation for people with disability if they were to participate in sport, examples of opportunities that evolve from this research include:

01 Sport and recreation, government, and disability sectors

- ▶ Accessible, easy to locate online guidance on managing periods for people with disability participating in sport e.g., the body and performance, practical product knowledge and accessibility, and normalising conversation
- ▶ Promote the availability of funding for adaptive menstrual products to participate in sport.

Example guides include <https://www.sharethedignity.org.au/end-period-poverty/education-hub>;
<https://www.swimming.org.au/performance/athlete-resources/ignite-athlete-program/managing-your-menstrual-cycle>

02 Sport and recreation sector

- ▶ Coaches and instructors to be educated on communicating about managing periods when participating in sport with disability and providing flexible training options
- ▶ Accessible facility bathrooms that include a shelf
- ▶ Flexible uniform options.



03 Government and disability sectors

Disability funding criteria to recognise period product needs when participating in sport including adaptive period underwear and heating pads.



04 Period product suppliers

Adaptive, comfortable products including single-use pads with tabs that pull off stickers and non-bulky, unobvious period underwear.

