



Australian Tradies

Health Research Report

Conducted by Empirica Research June 2019



**TRADIES
NATIONAL
HEALTH
MONTH**



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Background

Tradies National Health Month (TNHM) is one of the key consumer facing campaigns run by the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA). The campaign, which runs throughout the month of August, places a firm focus on the health of Australia's tradies, raising awareness of a wide range of health conditions that may impact tradies, and physiotherapy as a treatment option.

As part of the first TNHM research survey in 2018, the APA commissioned a survey of 545 Australian tradies to generate a picture of Australian tradies: their ages, health concerns, health needs, barriers to seeking treatment, and their injury experience. Empirica Research was engaged by the APA to conduct this research.

The success of the 2018 survey means that the APA has repeated this research for TNHM 2019, with a slightly expanded scope. As well as gather key information about tradies' attitudes to health and wellbeing on the job, the 2019 survey explores their propensity to exercise and participate in sport, their attitudes and behaviours around warming up for work, and expansion of questions to incorporate mental as well as physical health aspects.

This report details the findings from the survey.

Methodology

- Conducted on behalf of the APA by Empirica Research
- The survey took place between Thursday April 18 and Sunday, June 2, 2019
- 87% of respondents were male; 13% female
- Biggest age brackets were 16-24 (36%) followed by 25-29 (26 %)

850

online survey of
850 Australian
tradies

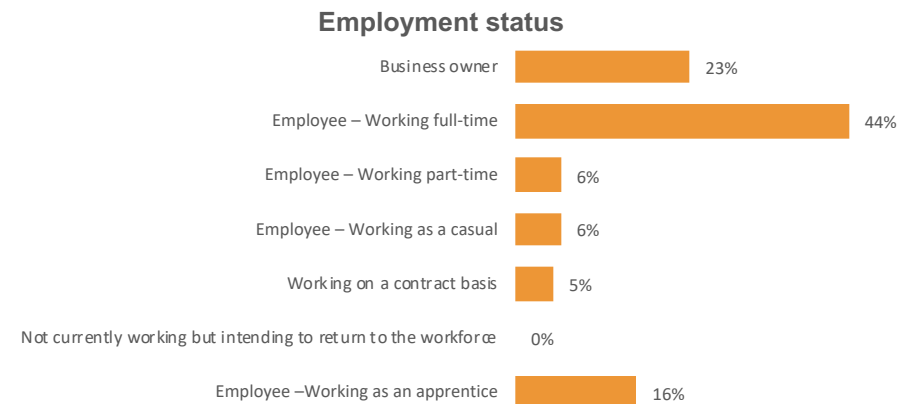
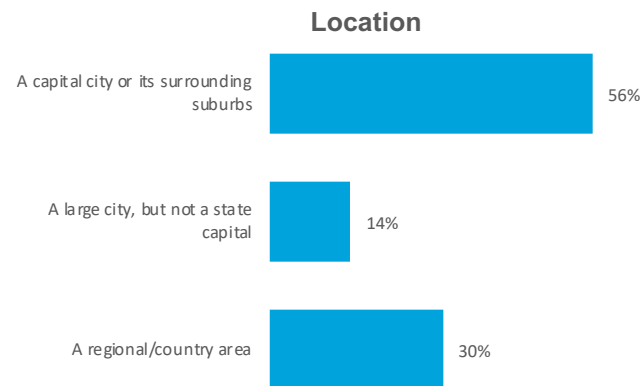
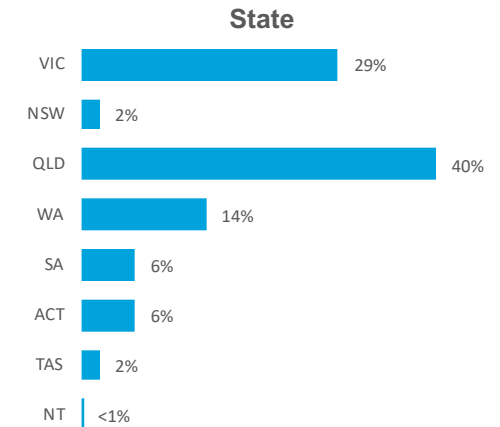
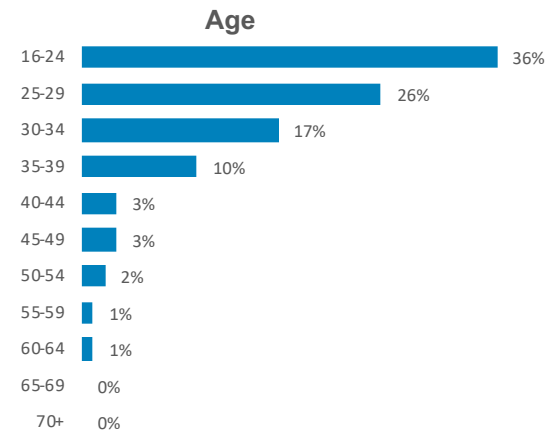
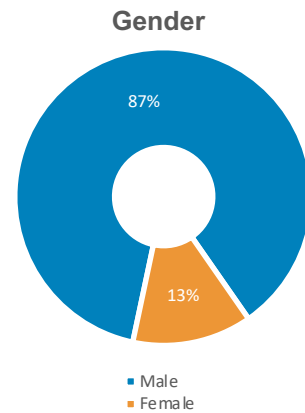
56%

of respondents
were from
Australian
capital cities

44%

were employees
working full time

Demographics: 850 Australian Tradies



Executive summary



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Executive summary

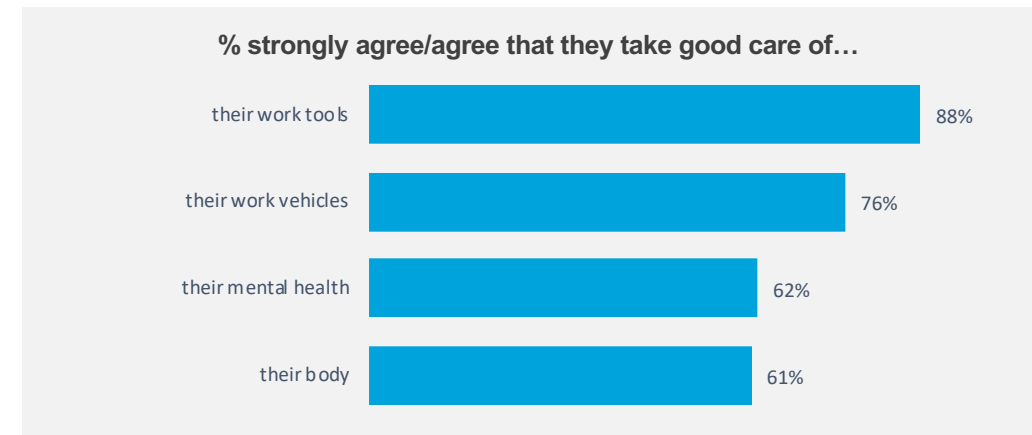
Tradies – healthier than we think?

Some are quick to label tradies as unhealthy eaters with poor exercise habits; however, it seems the pie-eating stereotype might be due for an update. With 70% of tradies reporting that they are trying to be healthy with their diet, and 69% classifying themselves as 'fit', today's tradies seem to be changing the mould.

In terms of exercise, 56% of tradies say they exercise regularly outside of work (and 43% say that they exercise outside of work specifically for the purpose of guarding against injury), with going to the gym for weights, cardio, and/or fitness classes the most common form of exercise. Only 20% (skewed slightly towards older tradies, with families, and likely less time) said that they never exercise.

Almost half of those surveyed (48%) hadn't taken a single sick day in the past 6 months.

Tradies themselves are the most important tool –but not enough see it that way. Consistent with the results of our 2018 survey, tradies are inclined to take better care of their tools and their work vehicle than they are of their own body and mind:



This is a concerning result not only because of what it says about how tradies view their own health, but because 68% and 69% of tradies respectively say that they find it hard to do their job if they are not at their physical or mental best.



Executive summary

Tradies' actions at work are not enough for their awareness of the demands of the job

Tradies recognise that their work is physically demanding, yet overall workplace culture appears to lean towards an attitude of toughing it out:

69%

believe that being sore is just normal for the work they do

68%

say that they find it hard to do their job if they are not at their physical best

60%

say they often have aches and pains as a result of their job

36%

say that they generally finish their work day stiff and sore

21%

say they would think someone was a bit soft if they complained about being sore from a physically demanding job (twice as high as the percentage who say they would think someone was soft for needing to take a day off for mental health reasons, 10%)

Despite recognising the demands on their body inherent in their job, however, participation in preventative activities and avoidance of risky behaviours is surprisingly low:

68%

Only 68% say that they follow safe lifting guidelines –the most common good habit reported, but leaving almost a third of tradies at greater risk of injury from unsafe lifting

58%

Only 58% say they stop doing something if it feels bad –so 42% of tradies are likely to be pushing their bodies past their healthy limits at work, and potentially aggravating prior or existing injuries or impeding recovery

43%

Only 43% exercise outside of work specifically to protect against injury to their muscles or joints –so more than half are not consciously using exercise as a form of pre-hab.

24%

Only 24% stretch or warm up before starting work, ie three-quarters are usually going into physically demanding work cold



Executive summary

Tradies are still being injured at work

27% of tradies surveyed reported having been injured once as a result of their work, and 42% reported having been physically injured more than once. The most frequent type of work-related injuries reported are joint, ligament, soft tissue and/or musculoskeletal injuries (63%).

Overall, 26% of tradies ever injured at work reported that they are still carrying one of these injuries. Overall, 82% of these tradies are suffering from a joint, ligament, soft tissue and/or musculoskeletal injury, with this figure largely consistent across trade type.

And the costs of injury are not insignificant

Of those tradies injured on the job, 57% reported that they took time off due to the injury, which resulted in financial strain (for 42% of those who took time off), strain on work relationships and commitments (39%), and on their personal relationships (20%).

In total, a quarter of all those injured at work (25%) said that as a result of the injury, they experienced mental health issues such as depression or anxiety. This figure was highest among labourers, among whom 58% of those injured reported that they had experienced struggles with their mental health as a result.

Changing social norms key to encouraging better habits of health care for tradies at work

While only 24% of tradies say that they warm up or stretch before starting work, this is almost the same as the proportion who don't warm up before they exercise (73% of tradies who exercise usually warm up or stretch beforehand). While a little of this discrepancy could be attributed to not having or making time for it in a work context, believing it's not necessary for the individual or in the work context, or not knowing exactly how to warm up for work, the single biggest factor is simple and powerful: What does everyone else around me do?

73%

In their exercise context, where only 12% of tradies who exercise say that 'nobody else stretches or warms up', 73% will warmup/stretch most of the time;

24%

At work, where 75% of tradies who exercise say 'nobody else stretches or warms up', only 24% warm up/stretch.



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Employers' can help change social norms around warming up for work

Linked to the social norms of warming up at work is the importance of management support for such beneficial health practices. As many tradies disagreed (32%) as agreed (36%) that their employer would approve of their taking the time to warm up and stretch before starting work, and 66% agreed that they would be more inclined to stretch or warm up before starting work if their employer prioritised it.

Physios second only to GPs in health visits by tradies

After the GP, physiotherapists are the most frequented health professional for tradies. Almost two-thirds (65%) have ever been to see a GP, 32% for a work-related issue; 45% have ever seen a physio, with 26% having seen a physio for a work related issue.

Exercising as likely to lead to injury as work, but more likely to lead to a physio visit

The proportion of tradies who exercise who report sustaining an injury through participation in their chosen activity (69%) is the same as the proportion of all tradies who reported ever having sustained an injury through work (70%). Where these two groups differ, however, is in their visitation of physiotherapists:

53%

of exercising tradies injured through their activity sought treatment from a physio;

35%

of tradies ever injured through work have sought treatment from a physio

Executive summary

Communication, communication, communication

We know that 69% of tradies find it difficult to do their job when not feeling their best mentally, yet only around 1 in 3 (31%) of tradies feel comfortable to speak to their employer about a mental health issue. When it comes to talking to their co-workers about mental health issues impacting their work, even fewer tradies, approximately 1 in 4 (25%), are willing to open up.

In terms of physical injury, the figures aren't much better, with only 53% of tradies feeling comfortable speaking to their employer about a physical injury that is impacting their work, and only half (50%) feeling comfortable opening up to their co-workers.

The lack of open communication about both physical and mental health problems among co-workers and employers is concerning. The 'tough tradie' culture of not speaking up when you need help –whether for a physical or mental health problem –seems to be persisting among many tradies.

In contrast, 73% of tradies said they would not think a co-worker was a “wuss” if they took time off for mental health reasons. So, whilst most tradies say it's okay for someone else to take a mental health day, they don't seem to be willing to engage in the necessary conversations with their employers if they might need to take one themselves. It appears that tradies are inclined to have 'tougher' expectations of themselves than of their peers.

Research findings



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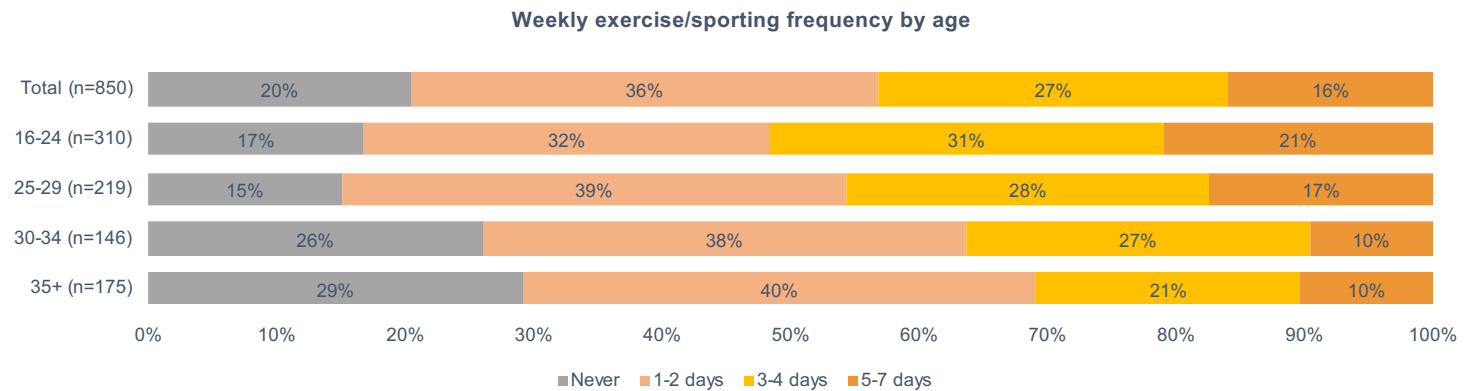
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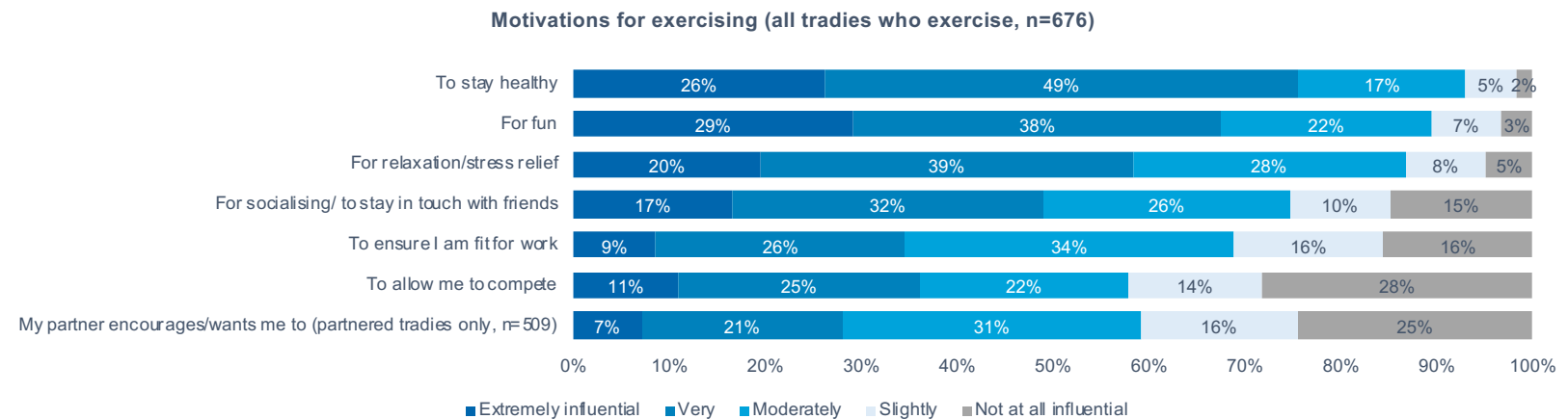
Research findings

Tradies and sports/exercise

Eight out of ten tradies reported that they exercise at least once a week, with younger tradies reporting exercising more frequently than older tradies.



With respect to why tradies exercise, fitness for work is not as strong a consideration as overall health and enjoyment.



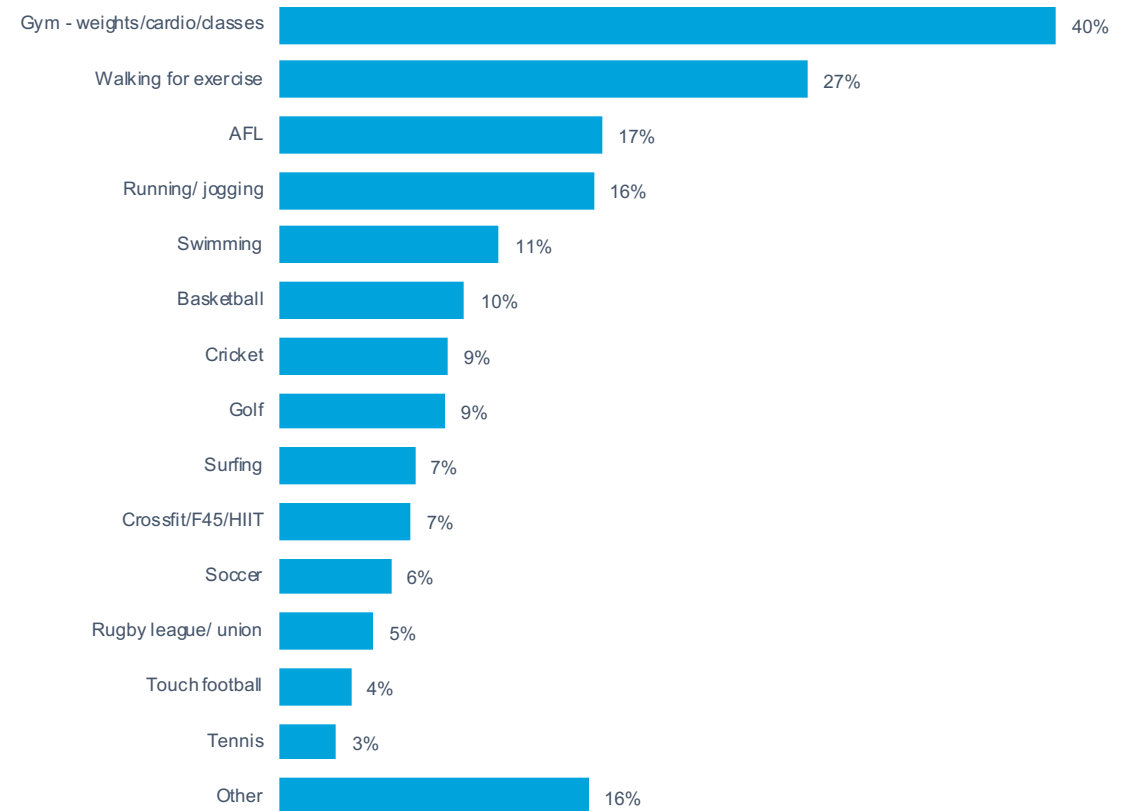


Research findings

Tradies and sports/exercise

The tradies who exercise participate in a wide range of diverse activities. While exercising at a gym was the most commonly reported form of exercise, followed by walking, AFL, and running/jogging, tradies are also swimming and surfing, playing basketball, cricket, golf, and soccer. There is even a handful doing yoga and pilates.

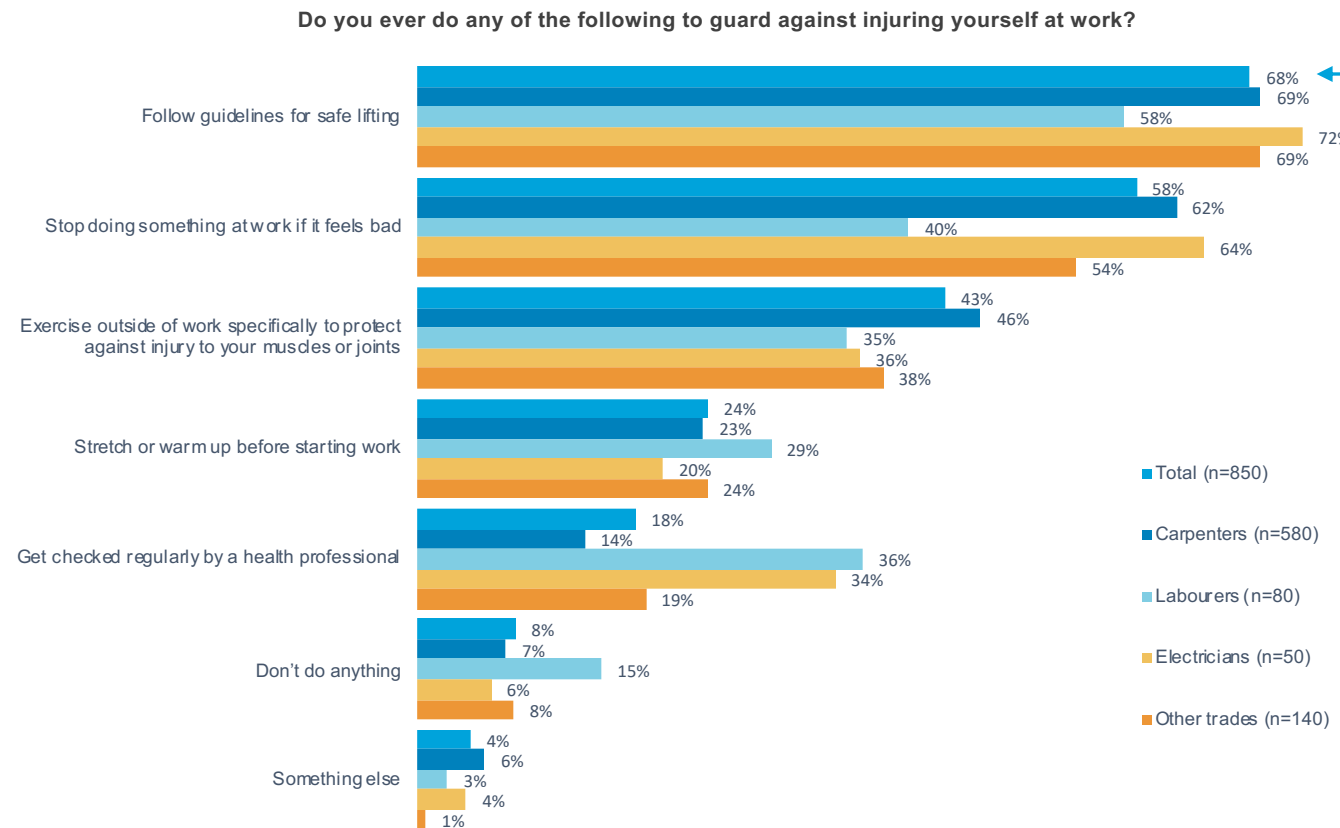
Do you ever do any of the following to guard against injuring yourself at work?



Research findings

More could be done to prevent injuries at work

Even though 86% of tradies agree or strongly agree that their job is physically demanding, the proportion of tradies who report taking action to guard against injury at work leaves room for improvement, with only 68% overall reporting that they follow safe lifting guidelines, 58% that they stop if something feels bad, and only 24% warming up or stretching before starting work.



This may be the most commonly done thing, but is 68% really enough?



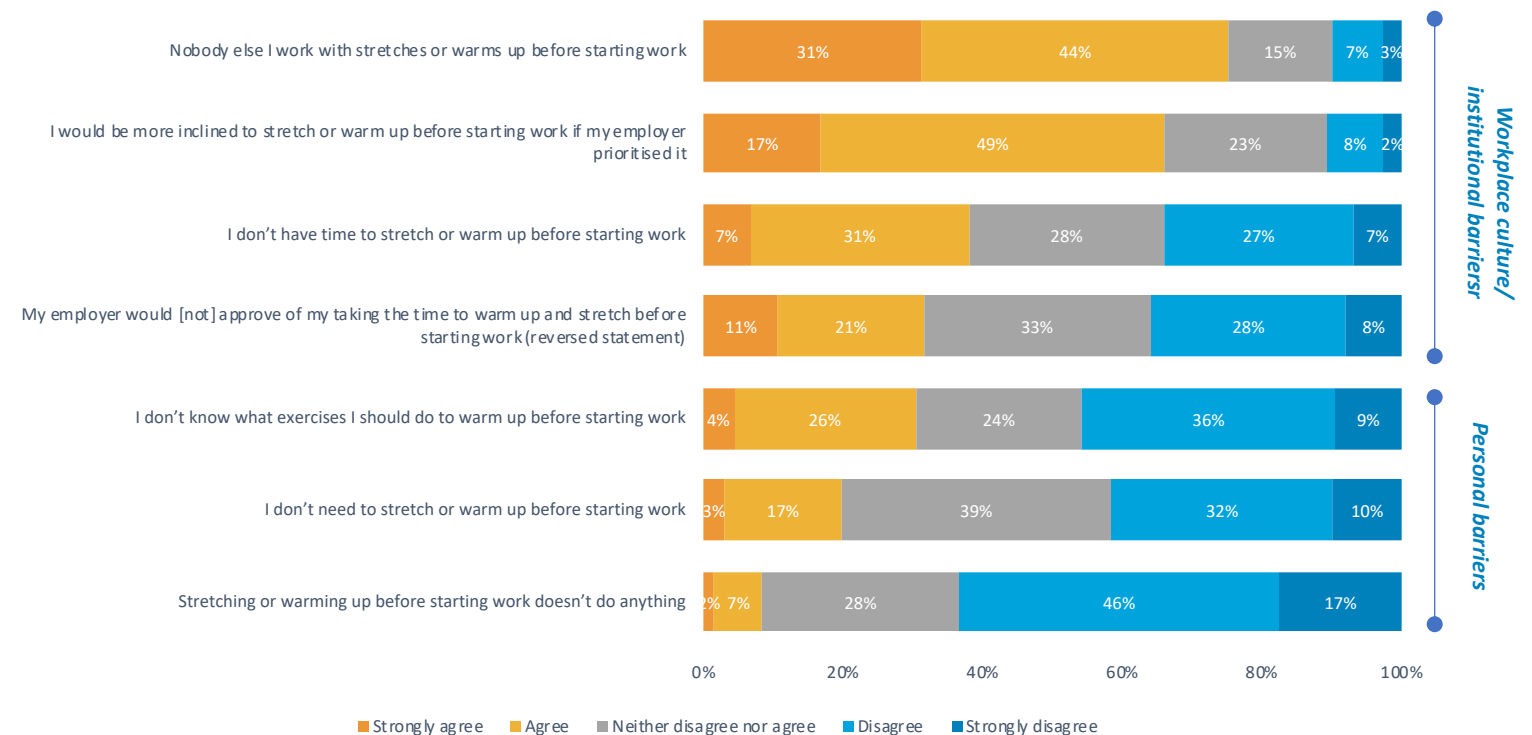
Research findings

Stretching and warming up before work – an issue of workplace culture and social norms...

With so few tradies making warming up and stretching before work a regular priority, it is instructive to look at their collective attitudes towards stretching before work in general.

- Very few believe that there is no benefit to warming up before starting work (9% agree or strongly agree), and relatively few believe that they personally don't need to (20% agree or strongly agree). A knowledge barrier applies to some (30% agree or strongly agree)
- Lack of time to warm up (38% agree or strongly agree) and perceptions of employer disapproval (32% agree or strongly agree) are mild institutional barriers, but these pale in comparison to the impact of employer prioritisation and social norms:
 - > **75% of tradies agree or strongly agree that nobody else they work with stretch or warm up before starting work**
 - > **66% agree or strongly agree that they would be more inclined to stretch or warm up before starting work if their employer prioritised it.**

Attitudes towards stretching/warming up before work – all respondents (n=850)





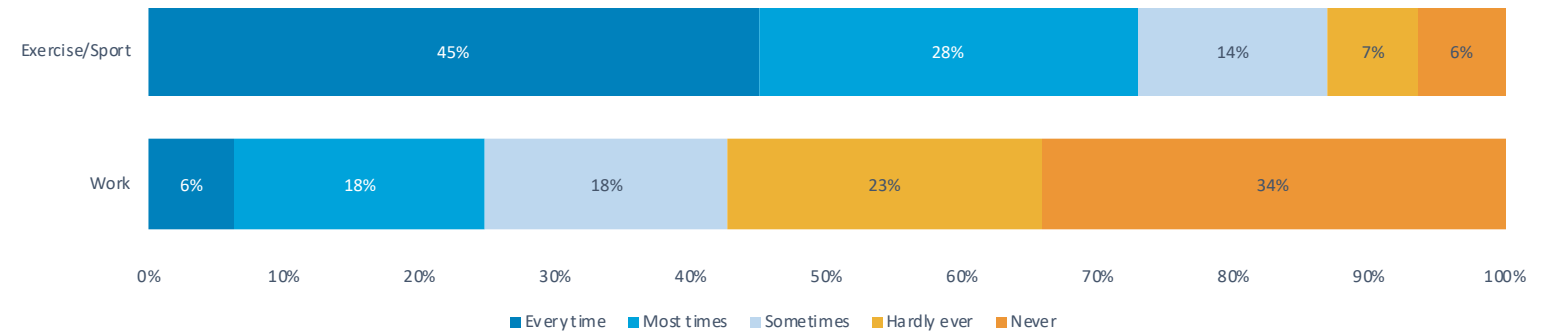
Research findings

...because they do warm up when they exercise

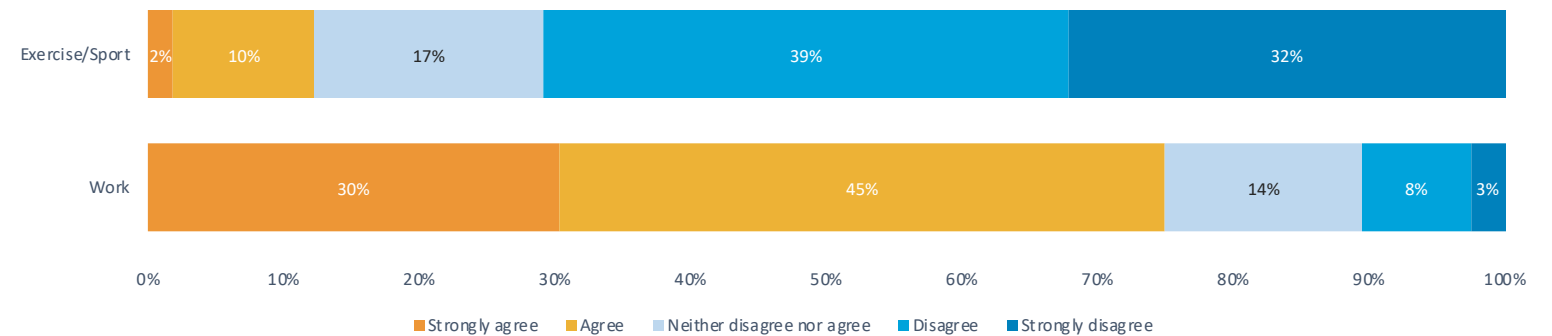
Looking at just the cohort of tradies who exercise, the difference in approach to stretching and warming up for sport compared to work is dramatic, and the impact of social norms is clear:

- In their exercise context, where only 12% say that 'nobody else stretches or warms up', 73% will warm up and exercise most of the time;
- At work, where 75% say 'nobody else stretches or warms up', only 24% do.

How regularly do you warmup/stretch before you start... (tradies who exercise, n=676)



Nobody else stretches or warms up before starting... (tradies who exercise, n=676)



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