

PICKLEBALL: GOOD Rx

A Prescription for a Healthier Life

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Audrey steps onto Court 3 for the fourth time this week. At 72, she's hooked — not just on the game, but on how it makes her feel. Happy! But what she may not fully understand is the science behind that feeling: cardiovascular fitness gains, muscle strengthening crucial for balance, and neurochemical changes that research links to improved mood and enhanced cognitive function.

Studies from major universities and health institutions reveal pickleball's rapid growth correlates directly with documented health improvements in players' physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing — all inherent by products of a game designed not for fitness, but for fun.

This "fun" dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle that other forms of exercise struggle to achieve: the more a person plays, the better they feel. The better they feel, the more they want to play. Validated by recent data showing 60% lower rates of depression among frequent players, this joy-driven motivation has proven contagious. With participation exploding by 1,500% from 2019 through 2025 — growing from 3 million to over 20 million players — pickleball addresses fundamental human needs for movement, challenge, and community in ways that drive sustained participation. As the fastest-growing sport in America for four years running, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, this momentum shows no signs of slowing.

Let's Get Physical

During a 120-minute play session, players typically maintain heart rates in moderate to vigorous intensity zones, the very range cardiologists recommend for optimal health. Other academic research has analyzed over 250,000 pickleball workouts tracked via Apple Watch technology. The data confirms that pickleball reliably brings players into beneficial heart rate zones, correlating with enhanced insulin resistance and VO2 max. Western State Colorado University similarly found that middle-aged and older adults who played one hour of pickleball three days a week saw

significant gains in blood pressure, cholesterol, and cardio-respiratory fitness in just over six weeks.

Pickleball engages the legs, core, arms, and back through varied movement patterns that build functional strength. A University of Utah study (2023) showed improved lower body power and functional mobility within six weeks of regular play. The sport's use of lightweight equipment minimizes repetitive stress injuries, while its weight-bearing nature promotes healthy bones and joint flexibility. Frequent, quick directional changes enhance stability and proprioception — key for fall prevention and daily movement efficiency. Constant paddle-ball interaction boosts hand-eye coordination. These movement patterns naturally develop balance, increasingly critical with age.

94% of beginners feel competent within an hour of play

The sport's accessibility is validated by recent data showing 94% of beginners feel competent within an hour of play, creating immediate inclusion and sustained participation. Regarded as less physically taxing than tennis due to smaller courts requiring less running around, pickleball provides an ideal entry point for those seeking fitness without intimidation.

For those tracking daily steps, University of Manitoba research shows pickleball generates 3,322 steps per hour for singles and 2,790 for doubles. The quick directional changes, paddle swings, and explosive movements mean each step burns more calories, resulting in 400–600 calories per hour — 40% more than walking. One 70-year-old player exemplifies this impact: after bariatric surgery and ongoing diabetes management, he found pickleball so enjoyable he sustained his fitness plan, ultimately losing 278 pounds. His infectious enthusiasm has recruited dozens of new players. In fact, millions of Americans who were leading sedentary lifestyles with little to no regular physical activity have discovered pickleball and transformed from exercise avoiders into enthusiasts.

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Play Therapy

Pickleball's unique combination of aerobic activity, strategic thinking, and social interaction create in players a neurochemical cascade. Studies from Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and the Pacific Neuroscience Institute show pickleball play increases executive function, memory retention, and emotional resilience — benefits most other recreational activities fail to collectively replicate. Mental health professionals report playing pickleball provides "stealth intervention" — therapy delivered through pleasure, particularly effective for those who've historically avoided traditional exercise programs. It releases endorphins, serotonin, dopamine, and anandamide, while increasing Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF), vital for neuron growth and neural network function. Higher BDNF levels correlate with better memory, sharper cognition, and reduced risk of Alzheimer's and depression.

The split-second decisions required by typical pickleball play activate the prefrontal cortex reward system, producing 40–60 micro-successes per hour. These "neural efficient flow states" mean the brain accomplishes more with less metabolic cost — enhancing mood well past playtime. Beyond immediate cognitive benefits, pickleball's mental demands act as comprehensive brain workouts. Among seniors, the sport addresses three proven dementia-prevention strategies: mental stimulation, physical activity, and regular social interaction. This makes it an excellent component of healthy aging.

Community as Cure

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy identifies chronic loneliness as a national epidemic, with health impacts comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes daily. Dr. Murthy sees pickleball as part of the solution: "Pickleball has tapped into something we've known — meeting in person, exercising, playing — are essential human needs." Research supports this with findings: social activity in pickleball correlates with lower stress, greater wellbeing, and reduced loneliness. Among those 70+, the social aspect is often the primary draw.

Unlike most exercise programs that isolate individuals, pickleball's built-in social architecture makes community inevitable. Small courts encourage conversation. Doubles play requires communication. Its easy learning curve means 94% of beginners feel competent within an hour, creating immediate inclusion. Mental health experts describe pickleball as the "medicine of community." The shared enjoyment on the courts nurtures friendships that extend into everyday life. This "micro-community building" provides psychological benefits across demographics — youth report improved mood, workers see stress relief, retirees rediscover joy and connection.

Examples like Life Time facilities, which have evolved into "fully fledged community hubs" hosting birthday parties, corporate events, and travel groups, demonstrate how pickleball facilities naturally become vital "third spaces" for community building. Premium venues like Pickle Pop in Santa Monica create welcoming environments "where everyone feels included and the experience goes beyond just the game," while high-design concepts like Ballers combine pickleball courts with food, drinks, saunas and cold plunges, proving the sport's integration with broader wellness and social experiences. Courts now appear at major hotels, community centers and even churches, validating the broad market acceptance and infrastructure development supporting sustained growth.

Prognosis: A Healthy Future

Pickleball's proven health advantages — cardiovascular gains, cognitive enhancement, emotional wellbeing, and social connection — help explain its sustained enthusiastic participation. This extensive evidence supports the industry's remarkable growth and future potential. With a 15.3% CAGR, the global pickleball market is projected by some analysts to grow from \$2.2 billion in 2024 to over \$7 billion by 2034.

This is not hype — it's a reflection of real demand driven by tangible wellness gains that participants experience firsthand.

A wellness solution with verified health outcomes

Healthcare systems are beginning to embrace this deeper reality, recognizing pickleball as more than a sport — it's a wellness solution with verified health outcomes that successfully engages populations who typically resist traditional fitness programs.

This healthcare validation reinforces a sustainable business model grounded in lasting personal and community benefits. Unlike trends requiring constant promotion, pickleball sells itself. Its benefits create lifelong advocates, positioning it as a sport with compelling, cross-generational appeal and staying power.

Just what the doctor ordered.

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Research Methodology

This analysis synthesizes peer-reviewed research from leading institutions including Harvard Medical School, Johns Hopkins, Pacific Neuroscience Institute, University of Utah, and Western State Colorado University.

Data sources include published studies from 2023-2024, industry participation statistics from USA Pickleball Association, market analysis from multiple sports industry reports, and longitudinal health outcome studies. The analysis cross-references cardiovascular, neurological, and social health research with participation growth data to identify correlations between pickleball engagement and measurable wellness improvements.

About the Author

Robert Johans is a B2B marketing specialist and pickleball industry analyst who tracks the intersection of sports participation trends, health outcomes, and market dynamics.



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