

# Physical activity

Fact sheet N°385  
February 2014

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## Key facts

- Physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for death worldwide.
  - Approximately 3.2 million people die each year due to physical inactivity.
  - Physical inactivity is a key risk factor for noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes.
  - Physical activity has significant health benefits and contributes to prevent NCDs.
  - Globally, one in three adults is not active enough.
  - Policies to address physical inactivity are operational in 56% of WHO Member States.
  - WHO Member States have agreed to reduce physical inactivity by 10% by 2025.
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## What is physical activity?

WHO defines physical activity as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure – including activities undertaken while working, playing, carrying out household chores, travelling, and engaging in recreational pursuits.

The term "physical activity" should not be confused with "exercise", which is a subcategory of physical activity that is planned, structured, repetitive, and aims to improve or maintain one or more components of physical fitness. Both, moderate and vigorous intensity physical activity brings health benefits.

The intensity of different forms of physical activity varies between people. In order to be beneficial for cardiorespiratory health, all activity should be performed in bouts of at least 10 minutes duration. WHO recommends:

- for children and adolescents: 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity activity per day;
- for adults (18+): 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity per week.

## Benefits of physical activity

Regular physical activity of moderate intensity – such as walking, cycling, or doing sports – has significant benefits for health. At all ages, the benefits of being physically active outweigh potential harm, for example through accidents. Some physical activity is better than doing none. By becoming more active throughout the day in relatively simple ways, people can quite easily achieve the recommended activity levels.

Regular and adequate levels of physical activity:

- improve muscular and cardiorespiratory fitness;
- improve bone and functional health;
- reduce the risk of hypertension, coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, breast and colon cancer and depression;
- reduce the risk of falls as well as hip or vertebral fractures; and
- are fundamental to energy balance and weight control.

## **Risks of physical inactivity**

Physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality and causes 6% of all deaths. It is only outstripped by high blood pressure (13%) and tobacco use (9%) and carries the same level of risk as high blood glucose (6%). Approximately 3.2 million people die each year because they are not active enough.

Physical inactivity is on the rise in many countries, adding to the burden of noncommunicable diseases and affecting general health worldwide. People who are insufficiently active have a 20% to 30% increased risk of death compared to people who engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most days of the week.

Physical inactivity is the main cause for approximately:

- 21–25% of breast and colon cancers
- 27% of diabetes
- 30% of ischaemic heart disease.

## **Reasons for physical inactivity**

The levels of physical inactivity increased across the globe. Globally, around 31% of adults aged 15 and over were not active enough in 2008 (men 28% and women 34%). In high-income countries, 41% of men and 48% of women were insufficiently physically active, as compared to 18% of men and 21% of women in low-income countries. Low or decreasing physical activity levels often correspond with a high or rising gross national product. The drop in physical activity is partly due to inaction during leisure time and sedentary behaviour on the job and at home. Likewise, an increase in the use of "passive" modes of transportation also contributes to physical inactivity.

Several environmental factors which are linked to urbanization can discourage people from becoming more active, such as:

- fear of violence and crime in outdoor areas
- high-density traffic
- low air quality, pollution
- lack of parks, sidewalks and sports/recreation facilities.

## **How to increase physical activity?**

Both, society in general and individuals can take action to increase physical activity. In 2013, WHO Member States agreed to reduce physical inactivity by 10% in the framework of the "Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013-2020".

Policies and plans to address physical inactivity have been developed in about 80% of WHO Member States, though these are operational in only 56% of the countries. National and local authorities are also adopting policies in a range of sectors to promote and facilitate physical activity.

Policies to increase physical activity aim to ensure that:

- walking, cycling and other forms of active transportation are accessible and safe for all;
- labour and workplace policies encourage physical activity;
- schools have safe spaces and facilities for students to spend their free time actively;
- Quality Physical Education (QPE) supports children to develop behaviour patterns that will keep them physically active throughout their lives; and
- sports and recreation facilities provide opportunities for everyone to do sports.

## **WHO response**

The “Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health”, adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2004, describes the actions needed to increase physical activity worldwide. The Strategy urges stakeholders to take action at global, regional and local levels to increase physical activity.

The "Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health", published by WHO in 2010, focus on primary prevention of NCDs through physical activity. It proposes different policy options to reach the recommended levels of physical activity globally, such as.

- the development and implementation of national guidelines for health-enhancing physical activity;
- the integration of physical activity within other related policy sectors, in order to secure that policies and action plans are coherent and complementary;
- the use of mass media to raise awareness of the benefits of being physically active;
- the surveillance and monitoring of actions to promote physical activity.

To measure physical activity, WHO has developed the Global Physical Activity Questionnaire (GPAQ). This questionnaire helps countries to monitor physical inactivity as one of the main NCD risk factors.

In 2013, the World Health Assembly agreed on a set of global voluntary targets which include a 25% reduction of premature mortality from NCDs and a 10% decrease in physical inactivity by 2025. The “Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013-2020” guides Member States, WHO and other UN Agencies on how to effectively achieve these targets.

Together with UNESCO, WHO is developing a Quality Physical Education (QPE) policy package. The QPE policy package aims to improve the quality of physical education worldwide and make it available to everyone.