

IRELAND

PREVALENCE (%) OF ADULTS REACHING THE
RECOMMENDED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS, 2013

%	ADULTS (16+ YEARS)
MALES	30.7
FEMALES	31.9
BOTH SEXES	31.3

Total population: 4 605 501

Median age: 36.0 years

Life expectancy at birth males: 79.0 years

Life expectancy at birth females: 83.1 years

GDP per capita: €35 600

GDP spent on health: 8.9% (1)



Monitoring and surveillance

Physical activity in adults

Ireland has been collecting national data on physical activity since 1998 (2). The *Irish Sports Monitor* (ISM), under the leadership of the Irish Sports Council (ISC) (3), was established in 2007 and collected data on physical activity in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2015. The ISM gathers data on frequency, duration and intensity of physical activity carried out during leisure time, including recreational walking, as well as walking and/or cycling for transport and sedentary behaviour in different age and socioeconomic groups. A national surveillance system to monitor physical activity levels is being developed by the Healthy Ireland government framework (4).

The national recommendation for adults reaching the required physical activity levels for health is consistent with the European Union (EU) Physical Activity Guidelines (5) and with WHO's *Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health* (2010) (6).

According to the latest ISM data from 2013 (7), as Table 1 shows, the proportion of adults (aged 16+ years) who participated in 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity at least 5 times during the previous 7 days and meet the national physical activity guidelines increased by 2% between 2011 and 2013. Overall analysis of activity levels shows that females are more likely (31.9%) to be highly physically active than males (30.7%). It should be noted that the ISM gathers information on physical activity during leisure time only and gathers only limited data in relation to active travel and home and work-related physical activity.

The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) (8)¹, targeting older adults (aged 50+ years) shows that two thirds of Irish older adults report moderate (33.0%) or high (34.0%) levels of physical activity². Across all age groups, men are more active than women.

Table 1. Prevalence (%) of adults reaching the recommended physical activity levels, 2013

%	ADULTS (16+ YEARS)	OLDER ADULTS* (50+ YEARS)
MALES	30.7	42
FEMALES	31.9	26
BOTH SEXES	31.3	34

* Reporting high levels of physical activity.
Source: IPSOS MRBI, 2014 (7).

The WHO Global Health Observatory (GHO) 2010 estimates for Irish adults (aged 18+ years) (10) show that 64% meet the WHO recommended physical activity levels, with considerably more males (69.4%) than females (58.8%) being active.

¹ Physical activity was assessed in the TILDA using the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ) (9) short form.

² As defined by the IPAQ short-form questionnaire. The two criteria for classification for high levels of physical activity are: vigorous-intensity activity on at least 3 days per week, achieving minimum total physical activity of at least 1500 metabolic equivalent (MET)-minutes per week, or 7 or more days of any combination of walking, moderate-intensity or vigorous-intensity activities, achieving minimum total physical activity of at least 3000 MET-minutes per week. Such measures equate to approximately 1 hour per day or more of at least moderate-intensity activity, above the basal level of energy expenditure

Physical activity in children and adolescents

Ireland uses the cut-off points for children and adolescents reaching the recommended physical activity levels as set out in WHO's *Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health* (2010) (6).

Children and adolescents are reported together and, according to results from the Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity (CSPPA) Study (11) from 2010, as Table 2 shows, 19% of children (aged 10–12 years) and 12% of adolescents (aged 12–18 years) reach the recommended levels of physical activity for health (60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity (MVPA) per day). Girls were less likely than boys to meet the recommended physical activity levels. This difference is evident in both children (13% versus 27%) and adolescents (9% versus 15%). The likelihood of meeting the recommended physical activity levels decreases with age.

Table 2. Prevalence (%) of adolescents reaching the recommended physical activity levels, 2010

%	CHILDREN (10–12 YEARS) ^a	ADOLESCENTS (12–18 YEARS) ^b
MALES	27	15
FEMALES	13	9
BOTH SEXES	19	12

Notes. ^a Pupils from years 5 and 6 years of primary schools (aged 10–12 years). ^b Pupils in post-primary education (2 cycles of secondary education across 6 school years).

Source: Woods et al., 2010 (11).

The WHO GHO 2010 estimates for Irish adolescents (defined as aged 11–17 years in relation to WHO data) report that 28.4% reach the recommended physical activity levels (35.4% for boys and 20.4% for girls) (10). The reasons for the differences in figures between the GHO estimates and the national figures from the CSPPA study are manifold. These include differences in sample sizes and age ranges between the CSPPA study and the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study used to generate the WHO estimates. The HBSC study is also a health survey, rather than a specific behaviour study, with different definitions of physical activity given and based on self-reported data (12).

Policy response

Major policy documents adopted by government bodies

The ISC was established in 1999 as the statutory body responsible for the promotion, development and coordination of sports. The ISC's Statement of Strategy (13) covers several themes, including increasing rates of participation in sports and physical activity and the multisectoral efforts required to achieve this. This includes the national network of Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) (14), which aims to address specific gaps in the sports sector, and specific initiatives created – such as the Women in Sport programme (15) – to decrease the large disparity in male and female physical activity uptake rates in Ireland. A review of this programme found that mass participation events are used to raise the profile of

women's participation, the LSPs have proven largely successful, and there is potential to use branded schemes as part of successful campaigns.

The Sport Ireland Act was enacted in May 2015 to provide for the establishment of a new single sporting body, Sport Ireland, which will replace the existing State bodies, the ISC and the National Sports Campus Development Authority (16). The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is developing a new National Sports Policy which will set the agenda for Sport Ireland and a framework for sports in Ireland over the coming decade. This will include facilitating improved cross-sectoral cooperation on sports and physical activity and ensuring continuing improvement in participation levels across the population, including further narrowing of the gender gap.

The Department of Health published *Healthy Ireland. A framework for improved health and wellbeing 2013–2025* in 2013 (4). Within this framework are goals to increase the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life, to reduce health inequalities and to create an environment in which “every individual and sector of society can play their part in achieving a healthy Ireland”, in particular, those from marginalized groups. A commitment was made to develop a plan to promote increased physical activity levels across the population, to showcase how Healthy Ireland will work.

This National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP) (see Box 1) has been developed by a cross-sectoral working group jointly led by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department of Health. It addresses various target groups, including children and young people (specifically, in terms of educational opportunities), those from low socioeconomic groups, older people and those who are otherwise marginalized.

The Department of Education and Skills in conjunction with the Department of Health, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport together developed another framework, entitled *Get active! Physical education, physical activity and sport for children and young people. A guiding framework* (17), promoting physical activity and sports in school settings. This document aims to support schools in developing a coherent approach to providing high-quality physical education (PE) and opportunities for children and young people to engage in physical activity, exercise and sports before, during and after school. Other policies include *Better outcomes, brighter futures. The national policy framework for children and young people 2014–2020*, published in 2014 (18) and the National Recreation Policy for Young People (from 2007) (19), both of which come under the remit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Ireland is part of the European Healthy Cities Network (20), the European Network for the Promotion of Health-enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA Europe) (21), the European Physical Activity Focal Points Network, the EU Expert Group on HEPA and HBSC Ireland.

Box 1. The NPAP

The NPAP, due to be published in 2015, is the first cross-sectoral evidence-based plan to increase physical activity levels across the Irish population. While there is a wide range of measures already in place to encourage participation in physical activity, the NPAP recognizes that no single government department or agency working on its own can increase the country's physical activity levels. Many interlinking policies and programmes across domains such as health, education, sports, recreational physical activity, transport and environment all have important roles to play.

The plan focuses on different types of actions – some immediate and some longer-term, sustainable solutions – which recognize that behaviour change is complex and challenging and that it takes time. The Plan seeks to ensure that no group is disadvantaged and recognizes that targeted interventions are required to address and overcome the barriers to participation experienced by some people.

As a result of the variety of survey methods used (such as those by the ISM, the TILDA, the CSSPA study and data compiled by the WHO GHO), the NPAP commits to implementing a national surveillance system to regularly monitor physical activity levels in adults, children and young people in order to inform policy, enable programme support and delivery and enhance accountability. As part of the development of a comprehensive research, monitoring and evaluation strand within the NPAP, a validated set of baseline figures will be developed and adopted, including on the sedentary behaviours of children and adults.

Guidelines and goals

The Irish Department of Health and Children (now the Department of Health) published the National Guidelines on Physical Activity for Ireland in 2009 (22). These recommend that all children and young people aged 2–18 years should carry out MVPA for at least 60 minutes every day.

For adults aged 18–64 years, at least 30 minutes of moderate activity is recommended on 5 days per week (or 150 minutes per week), but for additional health benefits aerobic activity should be increased to 60 minutes of moderate-intensity activity, 5 days per week, spreading the activity throughout the week. Shorter sessions of activity are counted as still contributing to the overall exercise time quota, but these should each last for at least 10 minutes.

People aged 65 years and over are advised to carry out 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on 5 days per week, or 150 minutes per week, with a focus on aerobic activity. This age group is also advised to add activities targeting muscle strengthening and balance on 2–3 days per week in order to reduce the risk of falls. For adults with disabilities, the same adult guidelines apply (30 minutes per day of moderate-intensity activity, 5 days per week, or 150 minutes per week), combined with the advice to be “as active as your ability allows”.

Table 3. Summary of key physical activity initiatives in Ireland

HEALTH	SPORTS	EDUCATION	TRANSPORT	MONITORING	GUIDELINES
Counselling on physical activity as part of primary health care services	Existence of a national Sports for All policy(ies)	Mandatory physical activity in primary and secondary schools	National or subnational schemes promoting active travel to school and/or workplace	Physical activity included in the national health monitoring system or separate routine survey	Existence of a national recommendation on physical activity
YES ^a	YES	YES ^b	YES	YES	YES

Notes. ^a The National Physical Activity Plan 2015–2020 will include actions by health professionals to promote physical activity. ^b In Irish primary schools, 1 hour per week of PE is mandatory, and 2 hours per week are recommended in Irish secondary schools.

Additional information on action in key areas

Physical activity among older adults

A National Positive Ageing Strategy was published by the Department of Health in 2013. The goals of this strategy include promoting the development of opportunities for engagement and participation of people in physical activities in their local communities, as well as supporting people as they age to maintain or improve their physical activity levels (23).

The Go for Life programme was established in 2001 and is funded by the ISC. It encourages older adults to continue exercising for at least 30 minutes per day on 5 days per week. It is an initiative by the association Age & Opportunity, in collaboration with the LSPs (24) and the Health Service Executive Health (HSE) Health Promotion Unit (25).

Physical activity among the student and working populations

Smarter Travel Workplaces and Smarter Travel Campus are public awareness programmes run by the National Transport Authority that work with employers and tertiary institutions to implement voluntary travel plans. These travel plans aim to reduce car use when commuting and encourage people instead to walk and cycle (26).

The Minister for Health announced the launch of a Healthy Workplace Initiative, expected in 2015. It consists of two separate but complementary elements. First, legislation to require all public sector employers to have, and report on, a health and well-being policy; and second, the development of a Healthy Workplace Framework across both the public and private sectors in order to encourage and support the development of health and well-being programmes in all places of employment. The objective is to support employers to develop individual, practical plans identifying how they will protect and promote the physical, mental and social well-being of their employees. This will include a focus on promoting physical activity.

Physical activity and sports in schools

At Irish primary schools, 1 hour per week of PE is mandatory, and 2 hours per week is recommended for pupils at Irish secondary schools. In addition to supporting PE in schools, the Department of Education and Skills established the Active School Flag scheme in 2009 (27). The initiative is a whole-school approach, whereby schools apply to

be recognized or accredited as an Active School by responding to the self-evaluation framework to address how well they meet the established criteria. The framework and criteria give guidance to schools on areas they could enhance to optimize their provision for children and young people to adopt positive physical activity behaviours. Such provision includes physical activity during journeys to and from school (active transport), physical activity during lesson transitions (for example, short dance sequences between lessons); and physical activity during break times, as well as after school.

The Be Active After School Activity Programme (Be Active ASAP) was established in 2008, coordinated by the HSE and supported by the ISC (28). The programme introduces children to fun physical activity in a safe, familiar, structured setting, with emphasis on enjoyment, learning and variety of activity. The programme aims to improve the attitudes of both children and their parents towards physical activity and to lay the foundation for positive, lifelong physical activity habits.

The Green Schools Travel Programme is an international environmental education programme in which many Irish schools partake to encourage active transport to and from schools (29).

The latest data available to the Department of Education and Skills indicate that approximately 81% of primary and 96% of post-primary schools support students to engage in sporting activities outside of school hours (30).

Transport and the built environment

In 2009 the Department of Transport produced a new transport policy for Ireland for the years 2009–2020 (Smarter Travel – a Sustainable Transport Future). It promotes cycling and walking for their benefits to the environment as well as physical activity (31). Ireland has also produced its first National Cycle Policy Framework, with a vision to make cycling more accessible for all population groups across the country: the goal is 10% of all trips to be made by bike in 2020 (32).

Ireland has various tax incentives and schemes to promote active transport: the Cycle to Work scheme, which provides a tax incentive for taxpayers to purchase bikes to travel to work (33); the integrated ticketing or Leap Card scheme (34), which provides a mechanism for consumers to interlink with the various forms of public transport (currently available in Dublin and administrative cities); and the annual tax saving scheme which provides tax relief for consumers purchasing annual public transport travel passes (35).

Successful approaches

Sports Capital Programme

The Sports Capital Programme was established in 1997 and is operated by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (36). The programme aims to foster an integrated and planned approach to developing sports and physical recreation facilities throughout the country. Another objective is to assist voluntary and community organizations, national sports governing bodies, local authorities and educational institutions to develop high-quality, safe, well-designed, sustainable facilities in appropriate locations and to provide appropriate equipment to help maximize participation in sports and physical recreation. The programme also aims to prioritize the needs of people in disadvantaged areas in the provision of sports facilities and encourage the sharing of local, regional and national sports facilities by clubs, community organizations and national sports governing bodies.

Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) network

A network of 30 LSPs is in place throughout Ireland to coordinate and promote sports and physical activity at local level, especially among specific target groups such as older people, girls and women, people with disabilities, unemployed people and people living in disadvantaged communities (13). The LSPs are responsible for the local delivery of national participation programmes, including the Buntús Programmes for young people, the Women in Sport programme (14), the Go for Life programme for older people (24) and Sports Inclusion Disability programmes (37). Many of the LSPs have developed their own programmes tailored to local needs and have been very successful in delivering mass participation programmes for people of all ages. In 2013, the LSPs delivered 788 participation programmes in local communities.

Active School Flag initiative

The Active School Flag initiative by the Department of Education and Skills aims to recognize schools that strive to achieve a physically educated and physically active school community (27). The self-evaluation model has ensured that this initiative is highly successful, with over 30% of all schools registered and participating nationally, with the growth rate continuing to rise since the initiative's establishment in 2009.

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