



# **10 things you need to know about physical activity**



**1** Physical activity is generally defined as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure above resting level. There are a number of ways to categorize physical activity and inactivity in relation to the intensity or expenditure of energy. To gain health benefits in a comfortable way, the majority will find that regular moderate-intensity physical activity is most effective. Moderate-intensity physical activity is the type of activity that raises the heartbeat and leaves you feeling warm and slightly out of breath. The main sources of health-enhancing physical activity include normal and simple activities, such as walking, cycling, manual labour, swimming, housework, hiking, gardening, recreational sport and dancing.

**2** Having the opportunity to enjoy quality recreation is vital to the health and personal development of all individuals, regardless of gender, functional ability, cultural background, age or socioeconomic status. Children and young people are a particular concern, especially those from low-income families. Indeed, those from lower socio-economic groups have less free time and less access to leisure facilities. They are more likely to live in urban areas with poor road safety, high-speed traffic, and little green space, and this factor further reduces their opportunities to be physically active on a daily basis. In general, the barriers preventing people from being active include cost, lack of awareness, travel distances, cultural and language barriers, and access to local recreation facilities and safe places to play. Inequalities between countries are rising, with those in the eastern part of the Region most affected.

**3** Epidemiological research has proven that 15-20% of the overall risk for coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, breast cancer and fractured hips in

the elderly, is attributable to physical inactivity. Regular physical activity can help prevent and reduce obesity and maintain a healthy weight. It can also promote psychological well-being, and reduce stress, anxiety and feelings of depression and loneliness. Through play, sports and other physical activities, young people have the opportunity to become self-expressive and self-confident, know the feeling of achievement and be exposed to social interaction and integration. Physical activity helps prevent and control risk behaviour, such as tobacco, alcohol and other substance use, unhealthy diet and violence, especially among children and young people.

**4** In spite of the important health benefits of physical activity, many people are not sufficiently active in their daily lives. In Western Europe, at least two thirds of the adult population are not sufficiently physically active and levels continue to fall. Children around the world are becoming increasingly sedentary – especially in poor urban areas. Time and resources devoted to physical education are being cut, and computer games and television are replacing physically active pastimes. A survey carried out in 2001-2002 among young people in the European Region, showed that on average only 34% in the 11, 13 and 15 years age groups reported participating in enough physical activity to meet current guidelines. In most countries, boys were more active than girls, and activity levels declined with age for both sexes. Inadequate physical activity in children can have lifelong health consequences.

**5** Physical inactivity is recognized as a major independent risk factor for chronic noncommunicable diseases causing about 3.5% of the disease burden and up to 10% of deaths in the European Region. There is also an alarming economic price to pay for physical inactivity. Recent studies conducted

in Switzerland and the United Kingdom show that physical inactivity can cost a country about €150-300 per citizen per year. Increasing levels of physical activity would have a positive impact on the health of the population and the related cost.

**6** WHO recommends that adults should accumulate 30 minutes or more of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week. This recommended time can be split up into shorter periods of ideally no less than 10 minutes, but even shorter bouts contribute to substantial health benefits. A good example of this is using stairs instead of elevators. Children should undertake at least 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per day. Carrying out some physical activity at least twice a week should help to enhance and maintain muscular strength, flexibility and bone health.

**7** The environment in which people live – at home, at school, at work, travelling, and so on – often discourages them from being physically active. Yet 50% of car journeys in Europe are under 5 km, a distance that could be covered by bicycle within 15-20 minutes or by brisk walking within 30-50 minutes. Physical activity choices must be integrated in our daily lives in ways that make them easy, natural and desirable. Opportunities for physical activity in everyday life, for example active transport, should be made available and accessible to the whole population through school and workplace programmes. If we wish to make an impact on the general population, it will be necessary to apply this principle and create physical and social environments that enhance physical activity for people throughout Europe.

**8** Regular moderate-intensity physical activity is a very cost-effective way of improving and maintaining people's

health. The promotion of physical activity should therefore be a fundamental component of public health work, involving all sections of society. Action in this area should not be the responsibility solely of the health, sport, leisure, work or education sectors. It should be seen as a task to be shared by these and other sectors, such as transport, urban planning and environment. Likewise, the media is highly influential in promoting healthy lifestyles. Working together across sectors, in both the public and the commercial arenas, would promote more efficient action and therefore more effective progress towards healthier and more sustainable lifestyles. The synergies involved create a win-win situation for all actors. In addition, action should be supported at all levels, from local community level, through governments, to the international arena. It is important that strategies for collaboration and capacity-building at regional and local levels be included in national policy and action as local level initiatives have the greatest potential to encourage physical activity.

**9** Public health programmes for physical activity need to be planned with a long-term perspective and have clear and measurable goals and indicators. Surveillance of levels of physical activity among the population using standardized protocols is a crucial and necessary part of the public health response to current concerns regarding physical activity levels. There are a number of key principles that should guide Member States in the development of national physical activity strategies. Examples of these are: that the definition of physical activity goes beyond sports and physical exercise; that multiple sectors should be involved; that the environment should be conducive to physical activity; that there should be equity in access to physical activity; and that programmes should be based on the needs of the population.

**10** WHO is at the forefront of international developments to promote physical activity supporting Member States in strengthening policies and facilitating dialogue between policy-makers, health experts, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations and the media. In 2004, Member States adopted the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health ([http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/strategy/eb11344/strategy\\_english\\_web.pdf](http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/strategy/eb11344/strategy_english_web.pdf)), which aims to improve public health through healthy eating and physical activity. At the European level, several strategic documents have recently been adopted that can guide the work in this area. Of particular note is the European Charter on Counteracting Obesity (<http://www.euro.who.int/Document/E89567.pdf>) adopted on 16 November 2006 at the WHO European Ministerial Conference on Counteracting Obesity in Istanbul. The Charter recognizes the role of physical activity in reducing overweight and obesity. These two documents, in combination with the European Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (<http://www.euro.who.int/document/E89306.pdf>), adopted by the Regional Committee for Europe in September 2006, provide a unique opportunity for concerted action on and increased attention to physical activity across Europe to improve public health. In addition, policy commitments, such as the Children's Environment and Health Action Programme for Europe (CEHAPE) ([http://www.euro.who.int/childhealthenv/policy/20020724\\_2](http://www.euro.who.int/childhealthenv/policy/20020724_2)) and the Transport, Health and Environment Pan-European Programme (THE PEP) ([www.thepep.org/en/welcome.htm](http://www.thepep.org/en/welcome.htm)), can be used to achieve coherence and consistency in international action and to maximize efficiency in the use of resources.

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