

# ESTONIA PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FACTSHEET

This is one of the 28 European Union Member States factsheets on health-enhancing physical activity, developed as a part of a joint initiative between the European Commission (EC) and WHO Regional Office for Europe in the context of the implementation of the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union on promoting health-enhancing physical activity across sectors and the European Noncommunicable Diseases Action Plan 2012-2016.

The Regional Office is grateful to the European Commission (EC) for its financial support for the preparation of this country profile.



World Health  
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## ESTONIA

PREVALENCE (%) OF ADULTS REACHING THE WHO  
RECOMMENDED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS, 2014

| %          | ADULTS<br>(16-64 YEARS) |
|------------|-------------------------|
| MALES      | 35.8                    |
| FEMALES    | 37.4                    |
| BOTH SEXES | 36.7                    |

Total population: 1 315 819

Median age: 41.3 years

Life expectancy at birth males: 72.8 years

Life expectancy at birth females: 81.7 years

GDP per capita: €13 900

GDP spent on health: 5.9% (1)





# Monitoring and surveillance

## Physical activity in adults

Estonia established its national health monitoring and surveillance system in 1994, nominating the National Institute for Health Development as the lead institution. Data on physical activity are collected every 2 years as part of the Health Behaviour among Estonian Adult Population national survey (*Eesti Täiskasvanud Rahvastiku Tervisekäitumise Uuring*), which, among several other topics, measures frequency and duration of physical activity and cycling/walking, with data disaggregated by age and socioeconomic status.

According to the latest available data for Estonia from the Health Behaviour among Estonian Adult Population survey from 2014 (2), 36.7% of adults (aged 16–64 years) meet the recommended WHO physical activity levels (3) (see Table 1). The physical activity prevalence values are similar for males and females, at 35.8% and 37.4%, respectively.

Table 1. Prevalence (%) of adults reaching the WHO recommended physical activity levels, 2014

| %          | ADULTS<br>(16–64 YEARS) |
|------------|-------------------------|
| MALES      | 35.8                    |
| FEMALES    | 37.4                    |
| BOTH SEXES | 36.7                    |

Source: Tekkel & Veideman, 2014 (2).

The intercountry comparable physical activity estimates for 2010 for the Estonian adult population (aged 18+ years) from the WHO Global Health Observatory (GHO) (4) show a higher prevalence of physical activity than in the latest national data. According to the WHO GHO data, 84.8% of the Estonian adult population meet the WHO recommended physical activity levels, with 88.0% of males and 82.1% of females being active at the recommended levels.

## Physical activity in children and adolescents

Estonia uses the international cut-off point for children and adolescents reaching the recommended physical activity levels, as specified in the WHO *Global recommendations on physical activity for health* (2010) (3). Children and adolescents are reported together; according to the national data collected in the Health Behaviour among Estonian Schoolchildren report from 2009/2010 (5), as Table 2 presents, only 14% of adolescents (aged 11–15 years) reached the recommended physical activity levels. More boys than girls are active, with 16% of boys reaching the WHO recommended levels for physical activity for health, compared to 12% of girls.

Table 2. Prevalence (%) of adolescents reaching the WHO recommended physical activity levels, 2009/2010

| %          | ADOLESCENTS<br>(11–15 YEARS) |
|------------|------------------------------|
| MALES      | 16                           |
| FEMALES    | 12                           |
| BOTH SEXES | 14                           |

Source: Aavsee et al., 2012 (5).

The WHO GHO 2010 estimates for Estonian adolescents (defined as aged 11–17 years in relation to WHO data) (4) are in line with the latest national data, which show that 14.0% meet the recommended physical activity levels, with 17.3% of males and 11.0% of females being active at the recommended levels.

## Types of physical activity and modes of transport

Box 1 details how physical activity is promoted in terms of transport in Estonia, using tax incentives as one means of encouraging active lifestyles.

### Box 1. Transport and tax incentives in Estonia

Estonia is committed to providing a range of measures to encourage physical activity. Free public transport is in place for citizens in Tallinn (6); free car parking outside the city centre is also provided, to encourage physical activity or use of public transport to access the Tallinn city centre. Parking fees have been set to a high price in several towns, including Tallinn, as a disincentive to car travel. Additional measures being explored include changes to the tax system, with the aim of increasing the system's support for employers, enabling them to promote active lifestyles among their employees.

# Policy response

## Major policy documents adopted by government bodies

The Estonian Parliament has passed a policy entitled *The general principles of Estonian sports policy until 2030*, which broadly outlines Estonian sports policy over the next 15 years (7). This policy was devised through extensive consultation with the sports community and focuses specifically on ensuring that the majority, if not all, of the population are regularly and safely exercising, with the aspiration to ensure at least two thirds of the population are regularly engaged in sports activities. Emphasis is placed on physical activity throughout the life-course, from physical education (PE) in preschools through to physical activity later in life, supported by a strengthened sports infrastructure. The Estonian Ministry of Culture also developed the *Physical activity development plan 2011–2014* (8), a Sports

for All document which preceded *The general principles of Estonian sports policy until 2030*, raising awareness and addressing issues such as suitable sporting venues, and event and programme coordination.

The Estonian Government has also implemented the National Heart Disease Prevention Strategy 2005–2020 (9), aiming to motivate action to increase physical activity levels among the Estonian adult and youth populations. This strategy calls on local governments to acknowledge their role in creating environments conducive to exercise, as well as in implementing strategies to encourage individuals to fit physical activity into their busy schedules, rather than applying pressure to allocate time to exercise, which many find difficult. The *National health plan 2009–2020* reiterates this further, with policy areas covering issues such as safe and healthy development of children; creating healthy and supportive environments; and healthy lifestyle development in health systems (10). The Active Ageing Development Plan 2013–2020, conceived by the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs, aims to maintain quality of life throughout the ageing process and to encourage even older adults to continue physical activity and exercise (11).

In the education sector, 2 main policies have been adopted: the *Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020* and the Youth Development Plan for 2014–2020. The former aims to provide PE to the general population, allowing flexible, lifelong learning as well as specialist training (12). The latter is more focused towards youth participation and recreational activities and physical activity opportunities for this population (13).

## Guidelines and goals

Estonia has adopted national recommendations on physical activity for children and adolescents, adults, and older people. Recommendations for children under 5 years are anticipated to be released by the end of the 2015. These recommendations are in line with the *Global recommendations on physical activity for health* issued by WHO (3), providing examples of how to achieve the recommended amounts of physical activity (14). The recommendations provide specific guidance to older people (above the age of 65 years), focusing on flexibility and balance, as well as being physically active in order to prevent falls (15). The recommended minimum amount of physical activity for adults is 30 minutes of exercise twice a week.

Table 3 provides a summary of the key measures in place in Estonia for monitoring and addressing physical activity.

Table 3. Summary of key physical activity initiatives in Estonia

| 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 national recommendation on physical activity |
| NO*  | YES  | YES  | YES  | YES  | YES   |

\* From autumn 2015, Tartu University is planning to offer physical activity counselling within their physiotherapy teaching. The Estonian Government is preparing a Green Paper entitled "The green paper of nutrition and physical activity", which will include several proposals for possible counselling schemes. These might include nutrition and physical activity counselling services provided separately within various health services, or such counselling services being integrated into treatment by health care professionals (e.g. nurses or doctors). There is also some discussion of providing targeted counselling services to parents of obese children.

## Additional information on action in key areas

### Supporting physical activity among people with disabilities

The Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs regularly supports the Estonian Paralympic Committee competing at the Special Olympics World Games, in which Estonians have won over 100 medals since 1991 (16). The Estonian Union of Sports for the Disabled and Special Olympics Estonia further support marginalized groups, among other organizations. In 2014, more than €340 000 of funding was used to support these groups.

### Schools

PE is mandatory in Estonian schools, with a minimum of 2 lessons per week being compulsory for pupils in both primary (16) and secondary education (17). Separate curricula are specified for these 2 groups. In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Research and Education are collaborating with the University of Tartu to develop a programme for including more activity and movement during, between and after lessons.

Many of Estonia's local government subdivisions offer free public transport to students to reduce the number of students travelling to school by car. In addition, the Estonian School Sports Union has led campaigns to promote active travel to school. Some schools, municipalities and nongovernmental organizations in Estonia have implemented the Traffic Snake Game for pupils to encourage walking and cycling to school (18). Although participation in the game significantly improved the amount of walking and cycling among pupils (up to 90%), the game usually lasts for only 1 week, so only has a limited effect on pupil and parent behaviour. Suggestions have been made to introduce the Traffic Snake Game across the whole country and to extend it throughout the year.

### Workplace

The Estonian Federation for Company Sport has been established to promote physical activity among employers and employees. The Federation organizes various competitions and other Sports for All events for companies and their employees. They also provide an electronic system for companies to register the visits of their employees to sports clubs and fitness centres.

### Transport and the built environment

As part of a network for health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA) promotion, Estonia belongs to the WHO European Healthy Cities Network (19) (through Estonian Healthy Cities (20)). In addition, researchers from Tartu University are affiliated to the Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance (21). In 2 waves, from 2003 to 2006 and throughout the period 2007–2012, the Estonian Ministry of Culture aimed to build at least one outdoor leisure-time, Sports for All facility for each of the 15 counties in Estonia. The Estonian Health Trails Foundation (*Eesti Terviserajad*), established in 2005, has helped to build and develop many outdoor Sports for All facilities, of which there are over 100 in Estonia today.

Box 2 provides information about cycling initiatives encouraging physical activity in Estonia.

### Box 2. Cycling in Estonia

Since 2012, Estonian cyclists from Tallinn and Tartu have participated in the European Cycling Challenge, whereby ordinary urban cycling is measured with mobile applications such as Endomondo or Cycling365. The idea of this 30-day urban cycling competition is to encourage regular cycling (to work and other destinations) in towns and to map the main urban cycling routes for municipalities. The Estonian capital, Tallinn, won the European competition in 2013. Similar national campaigns or competitions in Estonia could significantly enhance active travel, both to workplaces and in urban environments more generally.

## Successful approaches

### Year of Sports for All (2014)

The Estonian Ministry of Culture named the year 2014 the “Year of Sports for All”. The campaign was coordinated by the Estonian Olympic Committee, and the partners included organizers of sporting events. Joining the project was voluntary and the main goals were to increase the number of people who are regularly physically active and to increase people’s awareness of movement and sports. The main target group was individuals who were already aware of the benefits of movement but were passive themselves. More than 1700 events were held across the country during the year. At the end of the project, 210 000 people had participated in public sports events, and 100 000 reported changing their habits and behaviour as a result of the Year of Sports for All.

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