

FINLAND 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.

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REGIONAL OFFICE FOR
Europe

FINLAND

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

%	ADULTS (18-64 YEARS)
MALES	32
FEMALES	36
BOTH SEXES	34

Total population: 5 451 270

Median age: 42.4 years

Life expectancy at birth males: 78.0 years

Life expectancy at birth females: 84.1 years

GDP per capita: €35 600

GDP spent on health: 9.1% (1)



Monitoring and surveillance

Physical activity in adults

The Finnish national recommendations on physical activity for health are based on the United States Department of Health and Human Services *Physical activity guidelines for Americans* (2), addressing young people (3) (including early childhood education and school-aged children (4)), adults (5), and older adults (6). The cut-off point used in Finland for adults reaching the recommended physical activity levels is in line with WHO's *Global recommendations on physical activity for health* (2010) (7).

The national health monitoring and surveillance system that includes population-based measures of physical activity for adults (aged 20+ years) was established in 2012 through the Regional Health and Well-being Study (*Alueellinen terveysterveys- ja hyvinvointitutkimus* (ATH)) (8), under the leadership of the National Institute for Health and Welfare. Data are collected annually; the physical activity measurements taken include: frequency, duration and intensity of physical activity; domains (leisure, transport, work, household); sedentary behaviour in different age groups; and socioeconomic elements.

Table 1 presents national data from the ATH collected in 2013 (9), reporting disaggregated data for adults (aged 18–65 years) and older adults (65+ years), with 34% of adults and 20% of older adults meeting the recommended WHO physical activity levels.

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

%	ADULTS (18–65 YEARS)	OLDER ADULTS (65+ YEARS)
MALES	32	25
FEMALES	36	17
BOTH SEXES	34	20

Source: ATH result reports, 2013 (9).

Another nationally representative study (10), based on objective measurements¹ of physical activity, reports that 24% of Finnish adults (aged 18–85 years) meet the current recommendations for aerobic health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA).

The WHO Global Health Observatory (GHO) intercountry comparable physical activity estimates from 2010 for Finland (11) show much higher proportions of adults reaching the WHO physical activity for health recommendations (73.8%) than shown in the national data. According to the WHO GHO 2010 data, the percentages of males and females meeting WHO's physical activity recommendations are 75.8% and 71.9%, respectively.

¹ Accelerometers, using a mean amplitude deviation (MAD) algorithm.

Physical activity in children and adolescents

As with adults, Finland also follows the international cut-off point for children and adolescents reaching WHO's physical activity for health recommendations (7).

In 2010, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Board of Education commissioned the Faculty of Sports at the University of Jyväskylä to develop a national monitoring system for physical functional capacity. The *Move!* monitoring system (12) was developed in 2010 in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the National Institute for Health and Welfare and the Trade Union of Education in Finland. The system reports on children and adolescents together, targeting pupils in grades 5 and 8 (children aged 11–12 years and 14–15 years).

The questionnaire-based LIITU study (13) from 2014 (monitoring children and adolescents' physical activity behaviour trends) reports that 20% of children and adolescents (aged 11–15 years) reach the WHO recommended physical activity levels (see Table 2), and more boys than girls are active, with 23% and 17%, respectively. The 2010 LATE study of children's health (14), which is similarly questionnaire based and targeted at younger children, reports that 88%, 94% and 90% of children aged 3, 5 and 7 years, respectively, meet the recommended physical activity levels.

Another study (15) (also based on objective measurements²) targeting children and adolescents aged 7–12 years reports that 50% meet the WHO recommended physical activity levels (see Table 2). This study shows that more boys (60%) than girls (42%) are active, and that 17% of adolescents (aged 13–15 years) meet the recommended physical activity levels for health.

Table 2. Prevalence (%) of children and adolescents reaching the national recommended physical activity levels

%	ADOLESCENTS (11–15 YEARS) ^a	CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS (7–12 YEARS) ^{*b}	ADOLESCENTS (13–15 YEARS) ^{** b}
MALES	23	60	
FEMALES	17	42	
BOTH SEXES	20	50	17

Notes: Studies based on objective measures, with cut-off points of at least 60 minutes of MVPA per day, targeting students from grades 1–6* and grades 7–9**. Sources: ^aLIITU study, 2014 (13); ^bTammelin, Laine & Turpeinen, 2013 (15).

According to WHO GHO 2010 data (11), 23% of Finnish adolescents (defined as aged 11–17 years in relation to WHO data) reach the recommended physical activity levels, with many more boys (31.8%) than girls (14.7%) being physically active.

² Accelerometers (ActiGraph), using a cut-off of 2296 counts per minute (CPM) for moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity (MVPA).

Physical activity and sedentary behaviour

Physical activity and sedentary behaviour were objectively measured for the first time in Finland in 2011. The results of the analysis showed that the majority of adults (76%) spent most of their waking hours exhibiting sedentary behaviours, such as sitting, standing still, or lying down (10).

Types of physical activity and modes of transport

Box 1 gives details of an initiative that encourages people to use outdoor space for physical activity in Finland.

Box 1. Healthy parks, healthy people

In 2010, Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services, the estate managers of Finland's national parks, launched a programme to encourage people to go outside into natural settings, to enjoy positive and genuine experiences, and to improve their physical health through a wide range of outdoor activities (16). The programme addresses 4 key issues: strategic partnerships, research and monitoring, green space accessibility and nature and health for people of all ages. It was launched in the Oulu region of Finland, in an attempt to combat the high rates of health inequality in the region, especially with regards to mental health and poverty. The project aims to use Oulu's natural resources, allowing the area's green spaces to enhance physical activity opportunities, along with the generally beneficial health effects that natural surroundings can bring.

Policy response

Major policy documents adopted by government bodies

Together, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Education and Culture have adopted a national strategy entitled "On the Move", to promote physical activity for health and well-being (projected up to the year 2020), which is in line with the principles of a Sports for All policy (17). The strategy aims to address physical activity measures throughout the life-course, and it particularly targets sedentary activities, aiming to reform inactive lifestyles through education and sharing and disseminating best practices. It also aims to make organizations in general focus more on physical activity, including day care, schools and workplaces. Crucially, it seeks multisectoral cooperation to achieve its aims. The Exercise Act, passed by the Finnish Government in 2015, aims to promote top-level sports, as well as (more generally) physical activity for all. Greater municipal responsibility is called for, along with cooperation between State administrative bodies and funding channels (18).

Guidelines and goals

Finland has national physical activity recommendations for preschool-aged children (19), school-aged children (3), adults (5) and older adults (6). The Centre for Health Promotion Research (UKK Institute) recommends being active several days a week (at least 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderate activity or 1 hour and 15 minutes of vigorous activity). On top of this, muscular strength training should be carried out twice per week to improve balance. As

mentioned earlier, these recommendations are in line with the 2008 United States Department of Health and Human Services *Physical activity guidelines for Americans* (2), as well as the benchmarks specified by WHO in the *Global recommendations on physical activity for health* (2010) (7).

Early in 2015, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health launched for the first time a set of national recommendations to reduce sitting time. These are directed towards all age groups (20).

Table 3 presents a summary of the key measures in place to monitor and address physical activity in Finland.

Table 3. Summary of key physical activity initiatives in Finland

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
YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Additional information on action in key areas

Supporting marginalized groups

Two frameworks have been developed to support marginalized groups in Finland. The first is the programme for integrating immigrants through sports, established in 2010 by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The aim is to help immigrant populations to increase social ties and inclusion within communities, as well as increasing employability (21). The second scheme (also established in 2009 by the Ministry of Education and Culture) involves development grants for club activities, providing funds for activities run by sports clubs and other local organizations that require monetary support (22). In addition, third-sector public health organizations – gathered under the umbrella of the Finnish Federation of Adapted Physical Activity – are often very active in the HEPA field (23).

Schools

In Finnish primary schools, a compulsory minimum of 2 hours per week of physical education (PE) exists for pupils throughout the basic education years (classes 1–9: children aged 7–16 years). In post-secondary general education (called Lukio for academics aged 16–19 years), there are compulsory PE courses (1 course lasts approximately 38 hours) and 3 national voluntary courses.

Finnish Schools on the Move is a national programme funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture (24). It aims to establish a physically active culture in Finnish comprehensive schools. Individual schools are given the freedom to devise and implement their own plans. The programme was piloted from 2010–2012 and continued from 2012 onwards with positive results: 50% of the municipalities and 1000 schools (about 40%) are now involved in the

programme. The methods used involve adding more physical activity to school days, for example, by increasing the pupils' use of active transport and encouraging physical activity during break times, along with physically active learning methods within lessons.

Under the umbrella of the Schools on the Move programme, various schemes exist, including the "cycling and walking school bus" scheme, launched by the Network of Finnish Cycling Municipalities. This initiative involves a group of parents, grandparents or teachers creating an established route to school, allowing families to journey together to school using this agreed route and schedule, but instead of taking a bus, they walk or cycle (25).

Workplace

In 2012, Finland developed the *National working life development strategy to 2020* (26). It aims to make Finnish working life the best in Europe by the year 2020 (27). The preparation of the strategy – coordinated by the Ministry of Employment and the Economy in cooperation with employee and employer organizations – has involved a large number of partners. The aim is to increase the employment rate and improve the quality of working life, well-being at work and work productivity. HEPA is emphasized in the key building blocks of the strategy, specifically entitled "health and well-being at work", including suggestions such as encouraging employees to exercise.

The Finnish Fit for Life programme (28) is a national initiative funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The central aims of the programme and its sub-scheme "Working ability to working life" are to increase health and well-being at work and enhance the physical activity levels of working-age people. In addition, one of the Finnish Sports Confederation (Valo)'s basic tasks is to promote physical activity in the workplace (29). Many different projects are under way in this field in Finland, and physical activity in the workplace forms part of the fundamental work of many national and regional organizations.

Tax incentives are also used in Finland. Tax exemptions are possible when using a bicycle – amounting to a yearly exemption of €85 in 2015 (30). Employers have the possibility to support employees' self-directed (spontaneous) sports activities up to the value of €400 per person per year, and collective sports activities can be arranged for employees as a tax-free benefit (31).

Some employers are also starting to pay compensation to employees if they cycle or walk to work. This compensation is added onto the employee's salary, and then taxed according to the person's income tax rate (32).

Transport and the built environment

The *National strategy for walking and cycling 2020* produced by the Ministry of Transport and Communications outlines certain key goals as part of its strategic guidelines up to the year 2020 (33). These include a 20% growth in the number of people cycling and walking; increasing motivation for these forms of transport; and making transport distances manageable and journeys safer. Greater commitment and cooperation are also called for to create legislative changes, as well as effective monitoring and evaluation to ensure that these strategic guidelines are effectively implemented.

Finland is part of specific networks for HEPA promotion, such as the WHO Regional Office for Europe's HEPA Europe network (34), the WHO European Region physical activity strategy 2016–2025, the European Commission (EC) Expert

Group on HEPA, the WHO Regional Office for Europe National HEPA Focal Points network, the EC High-level Group (HLG) on Nutrition and Physical Activity and the HLG of the network of National Information Focal Points. Finland also has phase VI applicant cities waiting to be part of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network (35). The number of sports facilities constructed in Finland is among the highest in the world; nearly every Finn has access to swimming pools, sports halls, track and field grounds, and sports pitches and sports facilities are visited more than 300 million times each year (36).

Successful approaches

Move! Monitoring system for physical functional capacity

“Move!” is a national physical functional capacity monitoring and feedback system for Finnish 5th and 8th grade pupils (aged 11–12 years and 14–15 years) (12). The system comprises eight sections of measurements that provide information about the pupils’ physical functional capacity by measuring endurance, strength, speed, mobility, balance and basic motor skills. With the help of the feedback system, pupils, their guardians, health care professionals at school, as well as teachers receive information about pupils’ physical functional capacity, its connection to their well-being and advice on how to improve it.

National physical activity promotion programmes

Finland has successfully developed national programmes for every phase of the life-course: programmes to promote welfare and physical activity in day-care settings, Finnish Schools on the Move (24), Fit for Life (28), Strength in Old Age (37) and the National Policy Programme for Older People’s Physical Activity (38). Cross-sectoral cooperation is a crucial principle integrated into all of these programmes, and they involve extremely large networks.

Various campaigns exist in Finland targeting behavioural change, motivation and cultural susceptibility. These aim to reach different age and focus groups; examples include Moovit Sports Adventure, the Adventures of Joe Finn campaign, National Outdoors Day for Older Adults, “Take the stairs” days and various cycle-to-work challenges.

Multi-sectoral cooperation in HEPA is strong and wide-reaching in Finland. The purpose of the national “On the Move” strategy (17) and the new Act on the promotion of sports and physical activity (390/2015) (18) is to strengthen this cooperation even more.

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