



WellSpring

Sharing physical activity knowledge

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How do we get more people moving?

Examining the many great benefits of physical activity

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In many provinces, states, and countries, physical activity is losing support. It is undervalued by many citizens, organizations, and governments. Priority is being given to cost-cutting measures that may have little or no regard to the impact such decisions have on the overall health of individuals, communities, and the environment. In order to avoid significant detriment to our society, there is a need to strengthen supports for physical activity in a wide variety of settings and sectors. The benefits of physical activity are well-established through research, and as a sector, action needs to be taken to support achievement of the benefits across the population.¹

Individual health benefits

It is well established that physical activity is associated with better lifelong health and wellbeing, as well as the prevention of premature mortality and multiple diseases. Longitudinal studies have shown that physical activity can lower the risk of coronary heart disease (CHD), type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, and dementia.^{1,2} Physical activity can also lower the risk of developing multiple types of cancers: colon, breast, endometrial cancers, esophageal, liver, stomach, kidney, myeloid leukemia, multiple myeloma, as well as cancers of the head and neck, rectum, bladder and lung.³

The benefits from the current Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines on all-cause mortality and seven types of chronic diseases suggests that the current physical activity recommendations are associated with a 20% to 30% lower risk for premature all-cause mortality and incidence of many chronic diseases: hypertension, diabetes, stroke, cancer, depression, and cognitive dysfunction. Even for those adults who are not meeting the 150-minute guidelines, research shows that some activity is better than none.⁴

Physical activity also supports active aging among older adults. Not only can physical activity lower the risk of the chronic diseases and conditions discussed above, but it can also assist in their management. Both bone and muscle strengthening activities, as well as balance training, support functional independence⁵ and improves memory and task performance.⁶⁻⁹ Physical activity also helps preventing falls and injuries. Falls remain the leading cause of injury-related hospitalizations among older adults in Canada with

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The benefits of physical activity for all population groups are well-established.

This WellSpring highlights some of the many benefits including individual, psychological, community, environmental, and workplace benefits, and it provides a variety of ideas for policy decisions that will support increased physical activity.

between 20% to 30% of older adults falling each year.¹⁰ In 2004, direct healthcare costs associated with falls among older adults was \$2 billion. With a growing older adult population, estimated to be 25% of the total population by 2036, these costs are expected to rise.¹⁰ A systematic review of randomized trials of interventions to prevent falls among older adults identified that supervised group exercises and individually prescribed home exercise programs that combine both balance and strength exercises are most effective to prevent falls among those living independently.¹¹

Psychological health benefits

The psychological benefits are numerous as well. Physical activity can improve one's self-esteem and sense of wellbeing, as well as improve their overall quality of life.^{12,13} Physical activity can help lower and control anxiety and depression, with an immediate effect and without the side effects of traditional medications.^{14,15} Participation in physical activities can also decrease one's sense of isolation and loneliness,¹⁶ and it can contribute to the development of socially-connected communities.

Among school children, physical activity and fitness helps to maximize their academic performance. Over time, as children engage in developmentally appropriate physical activity, their improved physical fitness can have additional positive effects on academic performance in mathematics, reading, and writing. Recent evidence shows how physical activity effects on the brain may create these positive outcomes.¹⁷



Participation in physical activities can decrease one's sense of isolation and loneliness.

Community benefits

Individuals often cite lack of support, safety, and trust as barriers to participating in physical activity. However, the community setting can be one of the greatest sources for individuals to build sustainable social and emotional support to overcome these barriers.¹⁸ Communities that support participation in sport and recreational opportunities develop strong social bonds and are safer places. In turn, the people who live in these communities are generally healthier, happier, and more engaged with their community than in places where physical activity is not a priority.^{18,19}

Environmental benefits

Research also shows that outdoor activity conducted in a natural environment causes greater feelings of revitalization and positive engagement.²⁰ More specifically, green spaces for physical activity provide greater health and wellbeing outcomes than physical activity in built-up or indoor environments.

Infrastructure that supports active transportation for all ages and abilities can provide utilitarian opportunity for achieving daily physical activity recommendations²¹ and, at the same time, can decrease environmental impacts by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, and water pollution associated with motor travel.²²⁻²⁴

At a population level, policies and changes in environmental infrastructure can play a meaningful role in creating supportive settings. Consideration should be given to the realities and contexts across rural, remote, sub-urban, and urban environments.^{25,26}

Workplace benefits

Since employed adults spend about half of their workday hours at workplaces, offering physical activity programs at work is an efficient way to increase physical activity, which can be beneficial for both the employees and employer. Benefits include increased productivity, reduced absenteeism and associated costs to absenteeism, fewer occupational accidents, increased morale and attitudes towards the organization, and inviting workplaces that attract and retain employees.²⁷



Summary

As highlighted, there are a vast array of physical activity benefits. To attain these benefits, practitioners in a variety of sectors need to make strong policy and practice decisions, and they need to lead the movement toward an enhanced focus on physical activity.

Health practitioners

- Assess and provide advice on physical activity to clients as a routine part of healthcare services.
- Increase knowledge and awareness of the preventative and treatment benefits of physical activity by including it as a core component of training for all health practitioners.
- Support integration of physical activity into the practices of retirement and long-term care facilities.
- Support regular surveillance and monitoring of physical activity levels for those with a chronic disease, and regularly evaluate training programs and practice.

City councillors and local decision-makers

- Improve access to parks, playgrounds, green spaces, and other recreational facilities.
- Increase access to recreation facilities by reducing admission fees and providing affordable, low, or no-cost programming and coaching.
- Enhance personal and traffic safety in areas where people are or could be physically active.
- Support building schools within easy walking distance of residential areas.
- Support mixed-use (residential, commercial, educational, and employment areas) development where people can live, work, play and meet everyday shopping and lifestyle needs within a single neighborhood.

Benefits in the workplace include

- *increased productivity,*
- *reduced absenteeism,*
- *fewer occupational accidents,*
- *increased morale and attitudes towards the organization, and*
- *inviting workplaces that attract and retain employees.*

- Support community design features that promote being active to get to work or other places, such as connected streets, sidewalks, bike paths, and good public transit.
- Support commercial building codes that require stairways to be more accessible and visible.
- Support incentive programs that encourage people to use person-powered transport more and cars less.
- Provide secure bicycle parking close to transit stations and throughout the city.

Workplaces

- Encourage physical activity through a multicomponent approach of offering management support, physical accessibility to opportunities, policies, and social support programs.
- Improve access to stairways and encourage their use, e.g., installing motivational signs in stairways or signs by elevators and escalators that encourage stairway use.
- Change organizational culture by encouraging employees to sit less and move more in and around the workplace.
- Support active modes of transportation to the workplace by providing secure bicycle parking, showers, and incentives to move away from single vehicle use.
- Develop workplace challenges and events to encourage employees to engage in an activity and reduce their sedentary time.

Schools

- Increase the focus on physical activity with the same emphasis as academic subjects.
- Support the provision of daily physical activity opportunities and programs for staff and students in all grades.
- Support policies that include the development of safe routes to school using active transportation.
- Provide secure bicycle/scooter/skateboard parking and storage.
- Support inclusion of a playground when the school is being built.
- Develop indoor and outdoor shared-use agreements among municipalities and schools as a way to increase the degree and variety of accessible recreational facilities, particularly for communities where few public facilities are available and during inclement weather.

Governments (local, provincial, national)

- Develop messages that support and inspire the population to be physically active in their everyday lives.
- Provide resources and create awareness of the many ways and places the population can be physically active in their homes, schools, workplaces, and communities.
- Support campaigns that develop clear and consistent physical activity messages across various media outlets and methods.
- Financially support organizations that research, promote, and encourage participation across the lifespan in a variety of settings.

To learn more about how decision-makers can support physical activity, visit:
<https://bit.ly/2swVGxw>.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Nora Johnston, MA, is focused on leading the Centre toward its mission of promoting active living by bridging research practice, and decision-making.



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