

A sporting chance: physical activity as part of everyday life



Sport is bringing some much needed joy to the world. The Olympics and Paralympics, the Copa América, the European Football Championship, and Wimbledon are bringing excitement to millions after postponement or cancellation in 2020 (safety concerns notwithstanding). Although watching elite sport might be more stimulating than addressing modern day sedentarism, a third *Lancet* Series published this week, following on from publications in 2012 and 2016, shows the importance of regular physical activity and sport to health and wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it have further amplified the value of being physically active in ways that could benefit individuals and society more broadly.

Since 2001, there has been no improvement in global levels of physical activity. More than a quarter (1.4 billion) of the world's adult population were physically inactive in 2016, putting them at risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and premature mortality. This Series re-emphasises the urgent need to increase population levels of physical activity, with adolescents and people living with disabilities among the least likely populations to receive the support needed to meet WHO's physical activity guidelines.

However, the past decade has seen some progress. In 2018, WHO published the first global action plan for physical activity, providing an evidence-based policy framework for its promotion, with strong links to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and a global target to reduce physical inactivity by 15% by 2030. Health benefits from physical activity are now acknowledged to include improvements in mental health, dementia, cognitive health, sleep, and preventing falls and fall-related injuries. Furthermore, physical activity is now recommended in secondary and tertiary prevention of NCDs, especially cancer, to improve quality of life and survival. The co-benefits of physical activity promotion such as improved air quality and climate change mitigation are now widely recognised. The rationale for action has widened to include non-health sectors.

Disappointingly, policy implementation and scale-up of effective physical activity interventions have been insufficient and uneven, in part, some experts say, due to changes in the way the Global Burden of Disease project assesses risk factors. Uptake of a multisectoral approach to physical activity has been slow because it requires

cross-government collaboration and a substantial investment outside health system budgets. Compared with high-income countries, levels of physical activity are still far lower in low-income and middle-income countries, where the need is greater. Surveillance of physical activity remains patchy and, worryingly, it stopped during the pandemic in many parts of the world and has now left a gap in trend data.

Restrictions during the pandemic have probably decreased physical activity levels overall, and widened socioeconomic differences. Yet, preliminary research suggests that consistently meeting physical activity guidelines is associated with a reduced risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes. The pandemic provides a powerful catalyst to advocate for physical activity. Active transportation has been promoted, such as the creation of cycle lanes, open streets, and improved pedestrian infrastructure. Climate and public health communities have been calling for changes to urban design for years. The pandemic showed that when the need is urgent enough and there is political will, action is quick. The challenge now is to maintain and accelerate such changes.

Exercise during lockdowns was considered an essential activity by many governments worldwide—physical activity was seen to be as essential as food, shelter, and seeking medical care. Early government campaigns during COVID-19 encouraged the public to go out and exercise. Why then can governments not commit to promoting physical activity as an essential human need beyond and independent of COVID-19?

The much heightened public awareness about health, presents an opportunity to focus on the benefits of being healthy rather than managing disease. One goal should be to integrate physical activity into the way people lead their lives every day such that the physically active choices, which are often the healthier and more environmentally friendly ones, become the default. Using public transport, active travel, mandatory physical education in schools, and after-school activities are a few possibilities. The pandemic showed how easy it is to go for a 30 min daily walk. By advocating levels of physical activity that people can reasonably integrate into their lives, such as walking, expectations can be managed. Set the bar too high, and people will do nothing. But with reasonable targets, they might just get moving. ■ *The Lancet*



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For the **WHO Global Action Plan on physical activity** see <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241514187>

For **WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour** see <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/336656/9789240015128-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

For more on **downgrading physical activity in the Global Burden of Disease study** see *BMJ* 2021; published online April 29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2021-104064>

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