

Promoting Health Enhancing Physical Activity

Last update: September 2021

Recent studies show that physical inactivity is on the rise in Europe, despite the many health benefits of regular physical activity now being well established. For this reason, several policy developments at EU level have been implemented to promote awareness and encourage citizens to lead active lifestyles.

1. State of play: alarming and unacceptable levels of physical inactivity and obesity

The detriments caused by the **lack of physical activity** in Europe are well recorded, as are the significant economic costs associated with the effects of **sedentary lifestyles** and their related health problems, especially in view of the fact that most European societies show increasing numbers of people being overweight and obese:

- **53%** of the EU's population (18 and over) is **overweight** (Eurostat, 2021¹);
- **1 in 3 children** is currently overweight or obese.

Despite many millions of Euros spent to encourage higher levels of participation in sport and physical activity, there has been little impact on turning the tide of inactivity. **Physical inactivity remains the 4th leading risk factor** of global mortality increasing the risks of cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure.

¹ Eurostat, "Over Half of Adults in the EU Are Overweight", <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210721-2>.

² European Commission, "Sport and Physical Activity", *Eurobarometer*, 2018, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2164>.

According the 2018 Special Eurobarometer on Sport and Physical Activity²:

- **46 % of Europeans do not exercise during the week.** The proportion of individuals who does not do any type of physical activity increased from 42% to 46% since 2013. In addition, 47% do not do any moderate physical activity and 58% any vigorous activity.
- **35% of EU citizens do not do any form of physical activity** (e.g. gardening, cycling), which increased from 30%.
- **60% of Europeans do not reach the minimum levels of physical activity recommended by WHO**, and many of these are people come from low socio-economic backgrounds, minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities.

The treatment of diseases has both direct and indirect costs. Direct costs are related to the expenditure for health care whereas indirect costs cover the loss of economic output due to illness, disease-related work disabilities or premature death. Current research estimates **the cost of physical inactivity to be EUR 84 billion per year in the EU-27**.³

2. Benefits of regular physical activity

The evidence for the benefits of physical activity for health has been available since the 1950s.

³ European Commission, "European Public Health Week: The JRC Publishes an Overview on Physical Activity", *EU Science Hub*, <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/science-update/european-public-health-week-jrc-publishes-overview-physical-activity>.

There is now wide agreement on principles established by the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations for physical activity⁴: “**Adults aged 18–64 years should do at least 150-300 minutes** of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week.”

The **EU Physical Activity Guidelines**⁵ make the same recommendation. Exercise, sport and day-to-day physical activity can be instrumental in the prevention and management of a wide range of increasingly prevalent conditions including diabetes, cancer, coronary heart disease, obesity, stroke, musculoskeletal conditions and to help improve mental health. Indeed, a weekly exercise of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity reduced by 30% the risk of heart diseases and by 27% the risk of diabetes.⁶

A strong **focus on prevention, early intervention and behavioural change** is therefore necessary to stem the growing financial and societal costs associated with the increase in lifestyle-related chronic conditions. It is critical that we now adopt a preventative strategy for the benefit of future generations. This is particularly true in the post-pandemic context, which greatly increased the levels of physical inactivity which will have long lasting consequences on society.

3. EU work on HEPA

Several initiatives were taken at EU level to further promote the health benefits of physical activity. The **European Week of Sport** takes place every year from 23 to 30 September, with the goal to promote more active and healthier

lifestyles to European citizens. Created in 2015 in response to the worrying levels of physical inactivity, this week aims at promoting the importance of physical activity for wellbeing and increasing awareness about its benefits on individuals’ physical and mental health. Every year, several events are therefore organized throughout Europe to promote the importance of an active lifestyle for everyone.

The **Tartu Call for a Healthy Lifestyle** was launched during the 2017 European Week of Sport. It made 15 commitments to promote healthy lifestyles through physical activity, nutrition, and research and innovation. In 2019, studies to assess the progress made since the Call showed that it led to more funding for healthy lifestyle promotion, as well as more awareness and better knowledge on the topic.⁷ Yet, there is still a lot that needs to be done to achieve better results, as overweight and physical inactivity are on the rise in European countries.

The **HealthyLifestyle4All initiative** was launched on 23 September 2021. Over the next two years, the European Commission will contribute to develop projects and campaigns focusing on three pillars: improving awareness of healthy lifestyle across all generations; enabling an easier access to physical activity; and promoting a holistic approach to health and wellbeing. To achieve these, Member States, local authorities, and sport organisations submitted their **pledges** detailing their concrete contributions to the initiative. These pledges will then be implemented throughout the next two years, with the aim to commit to healthier societies.

⁴ WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity, 2020, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240015128>.

⁵ “EU Physical Activity Guidelines – Recommended Policy Actions in Support of Health Enhancing Physical Activity”, 2008, https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/sport/library/policy_documents/eu-physical-activity-guidelines-2008_en.pdf.

⁶ WHO Europe, “The challenge of obesity – quick statistics”, 2020, <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/obesity/data-and-statistics>.

⁷ European Commission. “Tartu Call for a Healthy Lifestyle – Where are we two years later”, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/default/files/nutrition_physical_activity/docs/2019_tartucall_en.pdf.