



Embracing Active Travel for Health

Factsheet: Health

Active travel for health

Increasing physical activity and reducing sedentary time

Insufficient physical activity and a sedentary lifestyle can lead to numerous chronic diseases. Walking and cycling as means of transport offer a simple way how to increase physical activity.

Improving and maintaining health

Regular physical activity and an active lifestyle are crucial in preventing chronic diseases and injuries and in maintaining good physical and mental health.

Environmentally friendly

Walking and cycling instead of using motor vehicles is the healthier alternative not only for individuals, but also for the environment.

What is at stake?

Physical inactivity has a major health effect worldwide. Scientists estimate that physical inactivity causes 6% of the burden of disease from coronary heart disease, 7% of type 2 diabetes, 10% of breast cancer, and 10% of colon cancer. Inactivity causes 9% of premature mortality, or more than 5.3 million of the 57 million deaths that occurred worldwide in 2008 (1).

Another consequence of modern lifestyle is an increased time spent sitting, also named "sedentary lifestyle". Time spent sitting is increasing at workplaces where more and more work is done at the desk and/or the computer, in leisure time where watching TV, internet surfing and videogames often replace recreational activities and finally in transport, where the number of car trips is increasing. Scientists identified sedentary lifestyle as an independent risk factor for chronic diseases and premature mortality. That means, that even with regular moderate or intense physical activity, individuals are at higher risk if they spend the rest of the day sitting (2).

Physical inactivity has a substantial cost burden in addition to a large health burden. From 1% to 2.6% of total healthcare costs are attributed to physical inactivity. A recent review found that the proportion of direct medical costs of cardiovascular disease due to inactivity was similar (1.5–3.0%). In addition, the indirect productivity losses due to premature death and disability, albeit, more challenging to measure and often not captured in physical inactivity cost analyses, are in many instances as high or higher than direct economic burdens, and can significantly affect the availability of economic resources (3).



Photo credit: Harry Schiffer (Eltis)

What are the public health benefits of active travel?

Increased levels of physical activity

Physical activity is one of the most important lifestyle factors for improving and maintaining health and regular physical activity is related to major health benefits.

WHO recommendations on physical activity for health suggests that children and young people of 5-17 years should accumulate at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily, while adult should reach at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity weekly. The 150 minutes weekly can be divided through all days into splits no shorter than 10 minutes (4).

It is not necessary to do sport or recreational activities to reach this amount of physical activity. Brisk walking or cycling, both as means of transport, can help including physical activity into daily life without much of extra time. It happens often that promoting active transport increases the total amount of physical activity more that promoting recreational activities or sports.

Prevention of chronic diseases

Regular physical activity helps preventing various chronic diseases (cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, obesity etc.), or reducing additional complications in existing diseases. There is a significant role in reducing levels of blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol and body weight (5).

References:

1. Lee IM, Shiroma EJ, Lobelo F, Puska P, Blair SN, Katzmarzyk PT. Effect of physical inactivity on major non-communicable diseases worldwide: an analysis of burden of disease and life expectancy. *Lancet* 2012; 380: 219–29.
2. Koster A, Caserotti P, Patel KV, Matthews CE, Berrigan D et al. Association of Sedentary Time with Mortality Independent of Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity. *PLoS ONE* 7(6): e37696.
3. Pratt M, Norris J, Lobelo F, et al. The cost of physical inactivity: moving into the 21st century. *Br J Sports Med* 2014;48:171–173
4. World Health Organization. Global recommendation on Physical Activity for Health. Geneva, 2010.
5. Warburton DER, Nicol CW, Bredin SSD. Health benefits of physical activity: the evidence. *CMAJ* 2006;174(6): 801–9.
6. World Health Organization. Global Health Risks Mortality and burden of disease attributable to selected major risks. Geneva, 2009
7. WHO Regional Office for Europe, Unlocking new opportunities: jobs in green and healthy transport, 2014

But also without losing weight, which is the most common motivation for starting physical activity, the previously named health benefits can be achieved. Scientist estimates that 150 minutes of moderate intense physical activity weekly could reduce the risk for ischemic cardiac disease for about 30% and the risk diabetes type 2 for about 27% (6).

Improving physical fitness

Regular physical activity helps maintaining physical fitness. Good physical condition is not only related to preventing diseases but also means better quality of life, functional capacity which allows independent life even at high age and better recovery after diseases or injuries.

Environmental health

The environment is closely linked to individual and population health. Using active transport helps reducing transport-emissions such as local pollution and greenhouse gases and providing a more pleasant environment. Using active transport also improves neighbourhood liveability by reduced local traffic impacts. Health impacts related to air pollution are reduced with decreasing motorised traffic.

Economy

On the contrary, a swift to alternative and healthy travel would have tremendous advantages in terms of job creation (7). Reports conclude that 'sufficient evidence indicates that the green and healthy transport sector could be a significant employer and contributor to the green economy', and calling for immediate action.

For further information please visit www.switchtravel.eu



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