

Selected Summaries

Exercise for Health

[WHO/FIMS Committee on Physical Activity for Health. Exercise for Health, Bull WHO 1995, 73:135-136.]

Sedentary living has long been recognized as a major contributor to ill health and unnecessary death, and adequate physical exercise recommended for maintaining physiological fitness. However, mechanization and automation in recent times have drastically reduced the physical effort and a significant human time is now being spent on secondary leisure activities, such as television viewing. Moreover, the tendency of lowering of physical activity is not restricted to adults alone and there are signs that children and adolescents are also becoming less active. This document summarizes the importance of adequate physical activity and suggests ways and measures to create a social and physical environment that is conducive to the adoption and maintenance of physically active lifestyles.

Recent research has indicated that physical activity increases longevity and, to a large extent, protects against the development of the major non-communicable, chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, hypertension, stroke, non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis, and colon cancer. Physical inactivity increases the risk of prostate cancer, lung cancer, breast cancer, and clinical depression. Appropriate levels of physical activity are known to assist in rehabilitation of patients with cardiovascular and other chronic diseases. Besides maintenance of physiological fitness, appropriate activity is necessary at all ages for regulation of body weight, optimal fat and carbohydrate metabolism and body's defenses against infections. People function, feel and look better when leading active lives, and their levels of anxiety and depression can be reduced. To sum up, compared with multifarious health gains that can be

expected, the hazards of sensible, appropriate physical activity are minimal, a fact which merits attention, considering that an estimated half of the world's population is insufficiently active.

In the light of the aforementioned evidences, it was suggested that apart from encouragement to gradually increase habitual activities, governments should promote and enhance programmes of physical activity and fitness, as part of public health and social policy. Children and adolescents, like the adults, should be provided with facilities and opportunities to take part in daily programmes of enjoyable exercise so that physical activity may develop into a lifetime habit. The elderly and people with disabilities should be provided with advice on optimal nutrition, exercise and facilities appropriate to their needs.

Comments

Today there is an enormous waste of human potential that can be attributed to physical inactivity. The role of physical inactivity in genesis of obesity and related problems is well known but the present communication aptly refers to other and probably equally important consequences of sedentary life style. In addition, it attempts to draw our attention towards effects of decreasing involvement of children and adolescents in outdoor activities including games owing to widespread availability of sedentary leisure activities like television viewing, culminating ultimately in reduced physical activity.

Another disturbing fact is the growing tendency of physical inactivity in developing countries as well as its extension to children and adults as a life-style, particularly in the relatively affluent sections of the society. We as pediatricians have a definite role in this context in sensitizing and encouraging the children under our care to 'exercise for health'.