

Healthway's Position on Physical Activity

Physical activity is a high priority area in Healthway's Strategic Plan 2004-2007. This reflects the adverse trends in physical activity participation in recent decades and the importance of physical activity in the prevention of a wide range of physical and mental health problems.

In 2000, only 46% of Australian adults were active at levels sufficient to benefit their health, and this level had declined from 51% in 1997.¹ Although physical activity levels in Western Australia are higher, with 55% of adults reporting sufficient activity in 2002, again the trend is declining, from 58% in 1999. Approximately 14% of West Australian adults were classified as inactive in 2002.²

In 2000, the Premier's Physical Activity Taskforce (PATF) for Western Australia was established to develop a strategy to improve physical activity levels in the WA community. The overall goal of the PATF is to increase from 58% to 63% by 2011, the proportion of Western Australians who are sufficiently active according to national recommendations. Healthway is represented on the PATF and on the working parties.

Physical Activity and Health

Physical Inactivity is considered the second most important behavioural risk factor after tobacco use, in terms of its contribution to the overall burden of disease for Australia.³

For women in Australia, physical inactivity is the leading preventable cause of disease.

There are around 8,000 preventable deaths each year associated with physical inactivity in Australia, and the direct health care costs alone have been estimated to be around \$400 million annually.⁴

Participation in regular physical activity has important health and social benefits. The

National Physical Activity Guidelines⁵ recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on most, preferably all, days of the week for adults.

The US Surgeon General's Report⁶ on physical activity and health reported the following specific benefits of physical activity:

- Reduced risk of dying prematurely
- Reduced risk of developing and dying from heart disease and stroke
- Reduced risk of developing high blood pressure
- Reduced risk of developing non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (Type 2 diabetes)
- Reduced risk of developing colon cancer
- Fewer falls and less injury for older persons
- Maintenance of a healthy weight
- Building and maintaining healthy bones, muscles and joints
- Development of fundamental movement and co-ordination skills in children.

There is also evidence that participation in physical activity has social, economic and environmental benefits for the community. For example, people who are physically active at recommended levels report higher levels of self esteem, self image and quality of life compared with inactive people. Other benefits include reduced absenteeism from work, reduced traffic congestion and air pollution resulting from more physically active forms of transport.

Groups most at risk

Men are more likely to be sufficiently active than women. In WA, 57% of men were active at recommended levels in 2002, compared with 52% of women.²

Sufficient physical activity was also positively associated with education level in 2002, with

60% of people educated to university level reporting to be active at recommended levels compared with 48% of people who had achieved less than TEE education levels.²

Physical activity declines with age. Among West Australians aged 18 to 29 years, 68% were sufficiently active in 2002, compared with 52% of people aged 30 to 44 years, 51% of 44 to 59 year-olds and 49% of people aged over 60 years. Similarly, inactivity was lowest among younger age groups, at 8% of people aged 18 to 29 years compared with 17% of people aged 60 years or more.²

The Children and Adolescents' Physical Activity and Nutrition survey in Western Australia in 2002⁷ found that 1 in 4 secondary school males and 1 in 3 secondary school females reported no physical activity including school-based activities, and almost 30% of primary school students and one half of secondary school students did not participate in active play.

National Recommendations for physical activity

The National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians⁴ refer to minimum levels of physical activity required for health in adults. The recommendations are:

- Be active every day in as many ways as you can
- Put together at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days
- If you can, also enjoy some regular, vigorous exercise for extra health and fitness.
- Think of movement as an opportunity, not an inconvenience

Australian physical activity recommendations for children and youth (aged 5 to 18 years)⁸ state that:

1. Children and youth should participate in at least 60 minutes (and up to several hours) of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day.

2. Children and youth should not spend more than two hours per day using electronic media such as TV, computer games and the internet for entertainment, particularly during daylight hours

Healthway's Position

Physical activity initiatives are funded through Healthway's health promotion projects and research areas as well as sport sponsorship and the promotion of the 'Be Active' message through sport, arts and racing events. Healthway's commitment to this area complements that of a range of other government and non government organisations involved in physical activity programs and physical activity promotion in Western Australia.

Healthway supports:

- Initiatives and policies that increase participation in physical activity and recreation for all inadequately active Western Australians.
- Actions designed to increase incidental physical activity (eg gardening, housework, use of stairs).
- Standardising the measurement of physical activity and the collection of longitudinal data on participation, enablers and barriers to activity.
- The provision of physical and social environments that encourage physical activity in work, home and community settings.
- The establishment of partnerships to ensure cross community and cross sector approaches to physical activity.
- The provision of good practice physical activity programs in all primary and secondary schools in Western Australia.
- Research into best practice programs and enabling environments and other supports for increased physical activity across the general community.

Healthway will:

- Contribute to improving the health of all West Australians by supporting current physical activity initiatives through grants and sponsorships.
- Pro-actively fund new research, evidence based health projects and sport and recreation initiatives that complement and enhance current activities and contribute to the development and application of a systematically tested and evaluated evidence base on physical activity.
- Focus on participation by and engagement with priority target groups such as youth, groups disadvantaged by income and education, Indigenous populations, culturally and linguistically diverse groups and rural and remote groups through grants and sponsorships.
- Build strategic alliances with sectors, settings and organisations that have the potential to make a substantial contribution to increasing physical activity levels eg transport, local government.
- Maximise funding returns by building evaluation and sustainability into projects where appropriate.

In particular, Healthway will:

- (i) Continue to support and evaluate community funding initiatives to increase participation in physical activity, while striving to avoid duplication with other funders.
- (ii) Give priority to research studies addressing physical activity promotion, in particular studies focusing on increasing participation among high priority target groups.
- (iii) Promote the “Be Active” message and related health messages through sponsorships, in collaboration with appropriate health agencies.
- (iv) Explore new settings in response to changing trends such as increasing participation in non traditional sport and recreation activities.
- (v) Play an active role as a participating member in groups encouraging increased physical activity such as the Premier’s Physical Activity Taskforce.

References:

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- 4 Bauman A, Bellew B, Vita P, Brown, W and Owen N (2002) Getting Australia Active: Towards better practice for the promotion of physical activity. National Public Health Partnership, Melbourne.
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