

Foreword

Being physically active is one of the most important things people can do to improve their physical and mental health. It prevents a range of non-communicable diseases, improves cognitive functioning and sleep quality, prevents falls, and reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety. Considering both the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on physical activity levels and the rising burden of non-communicable diseases and mental health conditions, increasing physical activity is now more important than ever.

Yet, despite the wide range of health benefits, one in three European adults does not meet recommended physical activity levels. According to OECD and WHO/Europe analysis, this will result in 11.5 million new cases of non-communicable diseases by 2050, costing European Union Member States on average 0.6% of their health care budget every year. While this may seem a small amount, it is equivalent to the total health care expenditure of Lithuania and Luxembourg combined. Though policy makers have made significant efforts across the European Union to increase population-level physical activity, more can and needs to be done to step up action on physical activity.

Step up! Tackling the Burden of Insufficient Physical Activity in Europe, jointly produced by the OECD and WHO/Europe, makes the economic case for investing more in physical activity policy. It shows the potential impact that increasing physical activity levels would have on population health and the economy: increasing the life expectancy of people who are insufficiently active by 7.5 months, preventing more than 10 000 premature deaths per year, and saving European Union Member States a total of EUR PPP 8 billion per year.

The report also provides policy options to increase physical activity, drawing on case studies from across the European Union. It highlights the wide range of policy options available, from setting- or target-group specific policies like interventions in schools, workplaces or the health care setting, to policies to increase access to sports facilities or encourage active transport and outdoor activities.

Investing in physical activity policies improves individual well-being and population health, while also returning EUR 1.7 in economic benefits for every EUR 1 invested. Now that the most restrictive COVID-19 measures have been lifted and societies are re-opening, it is time to move towards a more active future.



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