Physical Activity and Health

A Report of the Surgeon General

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

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Message from Donna E. Shalala

Secretary of Health and Human Services

The United States has led the world in understanding and promoting the benefits of physical activity. In the 1950s, we launched the first national effort to encourage young Americans to be physically active, with a strong emphasis on participation in team sports. In the 1970s, we embarked on a national effort to educate Americans about the cardiovascular benefits of vigorous activity, such as running and playing basketball. And in the 1980s and 1990s, we made breakthrough findings about the health benefits of moderate-intensity activities, such as walking, gardening, and dancing.

Now, with the publication of this first Surgeon General's report on physical activity and health, which I commissioned in 1994, we are poised to take another bold step forward. This landmark review of the research on physical activity and health—the most comprehensive ever—has the potential to catalyze a new physical activity and fitness movement in the United States. It is a work of real significance, on par with the Surgeon General's historic first report on smoking and health published in 1964.

This report is a passport to good health for all Americans. Its key finding is that people of all ages can improve the quality of their lives through a lifelong practice of moderate physical activity. You don't have to be training for the Boston Marathon to derive real health benefits from physical activity. A regular, preferably daily regimen of at least 30–45 minutes of brisk walking, bicycling, or even working around the house or yard will reduce your risks of developing coronary heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer, and diabetes. And if you're already doing that, you should consider picking up the pace: this report says that people who are already physically active will benefit even more by increasing the intensity or duration of their activity.

This watershed report comes not a moment too soon. We have found that 60 percent—well over half—of Americans are not regularly active. Worse yet, 25 percent of Americans are not active at all. For young people—the future of our country—physical activity declines dramatically during adolescence. These are dangerous trends. We need to turn them around quickly, for the health of our citizens and our country.

We will do so only with a massive national commitment—beginning now, on the eve of the Centennial Olympic Games, with a true fitness Dream Team drawing on the many forms of leadership that make up our great democratic society. Families need to weave physical activity into the fabric of their daily lives. Health professionals, in addition to being role models for healthy behaviors, need to encourage their patients to get out of their chairs and start fitness programs tailored to their individual needs. Businesses need to learn from what has worked in the past

and promote worksite fitness, an easy option for workers. Community leaders need to reexamine whether enough resources have been devoted to the maintenance of parks, playgrounds, community centers, and physical education. Schools and universities need to reintroduce daily, quality physical activity as a key component of a comprehensive education. And the media and entertainment industries need to use their vast creative abilities to show all Americans that physical activity is healthful and fun—in other words, that it is attractive, maybe even glamorous!

We Americans always find the will to change when change is needed. I believe we can team up to create a new physical activity movement in this country. In doing so, we will save precious resources, precious futures, and precious lives. The time for action—and activity—is now.

Foreword

This first Surgeon General's report on physical activity is being released on the eve of the Centennial Olympic Games—the premiere event showcasing the world's greatest athletes. It is fitting that the games are being held in Atlanta, Georgia, home of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the lead federal agency in preparing this report. The games' 100-year celebration also coincides with the CDC's landmark 50th year and with the 40th anniversary of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (PCPFS), the CDC's partner in developing this report. Because physical activity is a widely achievable means to a healthier life, this report directly supports the CDC's mission—to promote health and quality of life by preventing and controlling disease, injury, and disability. Also clear is the link to the PCPFS; originally established as part of a national campaign to help shape up America's younger generation, the Council continues today to promote physical activity, fitness, and sports for Americans of all ages.

The Olympic Games represent the summit of athletic achievement. The Paralympics, an international competition that will occur later this summer in Atlanta, represents the peak of athletic accomplishment for athletes with disabilities. Few of us will approach these levels of performance in our own physical endeavors. The good news in this report is that we do not have to scale Olympian heights to achieve significant health benefits. We can improve the quality of our lives through a lifelong practice of moderate amounts of regular physical activity of moderate or vigorous intensity. An active lifestyle is available to all.

Many Americans may be surprised at the extent and strength of the evidence linking physical activity to numerous health improvements. Most significantly, regular physical activity greatly reduces the risk of dying from coronary heart disease, the leading cause of death in the United States. Physical activity also reduces the risk of developing diabetes, hypertension, and colon cancer; enhances mental health; fosters healthy muscles, bones and joints; and helps maintain function and preserve independence in older adults.

The evidence about what helps people incorporate physical activity into their lives is less clear-cut. We do know that effective strategies and policies have taken place in settings as diverse as physical education classes in schools, health promotion programs at worksites, and one-on-one counseling by health care providers. However, more needs to be learned about what helps individuals change their physical activity habits and how changes in community environments, policies, and social norms might support that process.

Support is greatly needed if physical activity is to be increased in a society as technologically advanced as ours. Most Americans today are spared the burden of excessive physical labor. Indeed, few occupations today require significant physical

activity, and most people use motorized transportation to get to work and to perform routine errands and tasks. Even leisure time is increasingly filled with sedentary behaviors, such as watching television, "surfing" the Internet, and playing video games.

Increasing physical activity is a formidable public health challenge that we must hasten to meet. The stakes are high, and the potential rewards are momentous: preventing premature death, unnecessary illness, and disability; controlling health care costs; and maintaining a high quality of life into old age.

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Preface

from the Surgeon General
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I am pleased to present the first report of the Surgeon General on physical activity and health. For more than a century, the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service has focused the nation's attention on important public health issues. Reports from Surgeons General on the adverse health consequences of smoking triggered nationwide efforts to prevent tobacco use. Reports on nutrition, violence, and HIV/AIDS—to name but a few—have heightened America's awareness of important public health issues and have spawned major public health initiatives. This new report, which is a comprehensive review of the available scientific evidence about the relationship between physical activity and health status, follows in this notable tradition.

Scientists and doctors have known for years that substantial benefits can be gained from regular physical activity. The expanding and strengthening evidence on the relationship between physical activity and health necessitates the focus this report brings to this important public health challenge. Although the science of physical activity is a complex and still-developing field, we have today strong evidence to indicate that regular physical activity will provide clear and substantial health gains. In this sense, the report is more than a summary of the science—it is a national call to action.

We must get serious about improving the health of the nation by affirming our commitment to healthy physical activity on all levels: personal, family, community, organizational, and national. Because physical activity is so directly related to preventing disease and premature death and to maintaining a high quality of life, we must accord it the same level of attention that we give other important public health practices that affect the entire nation. Physical activity thus joins the front ranks of essential health objectives, such as sound nutrition, the use of seat belts, and the prevention of adverse health effects of tobacco.

The time for this emphasis is both opportune and pressing. As this report makes clear, current levels of physical activity among Americans remain low, and we are losing ground in some areas. The good news in the report is that people can benefit from even moderate levels of physical activity. The public health implications of this good news are vast: the tremendous health gains that could be realized with even partial success at improving physical activity among the American people compel us to make a commitment and take action. With innovation, dedication, partnering, and a long-term plan, we should be able to improve the health and well-being of our people.

This report is not the final word. More work will need to be done so that we can determine the most effective ways to motivate all Americans to participate in a level of physical activity that can benefit their health and well-being. The challenge that lies ahead is formidable but worthwhile. I strongly encourage all Americans to join us in this effort.

Audrey F. Manley, M.D., M.P.H.
Surgeon General (Acting)

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