



## **NATIONAL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY GUIDELINES**

### **ACHIEVING BETTER HEALTH THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

Physical activity is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. Everyone can gain health benefits from being physically active. Even if you have done little or no activity in the past, being slightly more active has benefits. Feeling more energetic, confident, relaxed, happy and being able to sleep better are immediate effects.

Many health conditions that affect millions of Australians could be prevented and treated with regular physical activity, such as cardiovascular disease – including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol – diabetes and some cancers. Physical activity also helps with prevention and recovery from injuries and improves mental health and wellbeing.

#### ***Cardiovascular disease***

Cardiovascular disease causes more deaths than any other single disease in Australia. Many of these deaths could be prevented by following a healthy lifestyle including regular moderate physical activity, healthy eating, low-risk levels of alcohol drinking and being smoke free.

There is strong evidence that physical activity helps to:

- reduce the risk of a heart attack, stroke or thrombosis (blockage of a coronary artery by a blood clot);
- improve blood cholesterol levels; and
- reduce high blood pressure.

#### ***Diabetes***

It is estimated that almost one million Australians have diabetes, although in about half of these people diabetes is currently undiagnosed. People who are physically active are less likely to develop diabetes.

Regular physical activity is also important for treating diabetes. Even a 30-minute walk after meals can help control blood glucose levels. Physical activity helps to:

- make insulin work more efficiently;
- reduce blood glucose levels; and
- reduce the risk of heart disease in people who have diabetes.

#### ***Cancer***

Being physically active can help prevent bowel cancer. Around one in five cases of bowel cancer are caused by inactivity.

Physical activity also helps prevent breast cancer. It is estimated that more than 10 per cent of breast cancer could be prevented if all women undertook moderate physical activity.

The World Health Organisation's International Agency for Research on Cancer has indicated that the greater the frequency and/or duration of physical activity, the greater the apparent protective effects for bowel and breast cancers.

#### ***Preventing falls and injuries***

Physical activity is particularly important for reducing the risk of falls and hip fractures in older Australians. Being physically active helps to strengthen muscles, improve balance and also maintains bone density.

#### ***Arthritis***

Muscle and bone disorders, such as osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis, can be prevented with regular moderate physical activity. In particular, being active helps with managing arthritis by reducing joint pain and stiffness, building strong muscles around the joints and increasing flexibility and endurance.

#### ***Mental health benefits***

Immediate benefits of physical activity include feeling more energetic, confident, happy, relaxed and being able to sleep better. Being physically active also leads to other improvements in mental health such as:

- enhances mood;
- relieves stress and reduces feelings of anxiety – physical activity can be as effective as meditation or relaxation;



- reduces symptoms of depression;
- builds self-esteem;
- develops children's social skills;
- reduces harmful and antisocial behaviour among young people;
- develops positive self-image among women; and
- improves quality of life.

### **Body weight**

Being physically active is essential to manage body weight. The more activity we do, the more energy (kilojoules) we burn. The National Physical Activity Guidelines recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days of the week, which is a good start to preventing weight gain. To lose weight, additional sessions and/or longer sessions of moderate intensity physical activity are recommended.

### **Safety considerations**

There is a small risk of injury during physical activity. However injury rates tend to be very low for moderate intensity activities such as walking, recreational swimming and cycling. Muscle and bone injuries are more common in competitive sports. People who have previously done little activity should gradually build up the intensity and length of physical activity. With proper training, including warming-up and cooling-down activities, there is less chance of injury.

People who have existing health conditions, such as heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes, should talk to their doctor about suitable activities.

*For more information about Physical Activity and Health and to obtain a copy of the National Physical Activity Guidelines, please visit the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing's Nutrition and Physical Activity website at: <http://www.health.gov.au/pubhlth/strateg/active/index.htm>*

For more information about Walk to Work Day, please visit the Walk to Work Day website at: [www.walk.com.au](http://www.walk.com.au)

