Physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for noncommunicable disease worldwide and is estimated to cause between 3.2 and 5 million deaths globally per year. Globally, physical inactivity is estimated to cause around 27% of diabetes, 30% of ischaemic heart disease and 21%–25% of breast and colon cancer. Physical activity is also fundamental in achieving energy balance and weight control.

Recent estimates show that approximately 31% of the world's population does not undertake the recommended amount of physical activity to gain protective health benefits. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the available data from eight countries show levels of inactivity range from about 30% to as high as 70%. Of concern, less than half of the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region have systematic monitoring of levels of physical activity in adults and children and very few countries have commenced any comprehensive action aimed at increasing levels of activity through sports, recreation, and cycling and walking.

In 2004, the World Health Assembly endorsed Resolution WHA 57.17: Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health, which called on Member States to develop national plans to promote physical activity. Furthermore, the Political Declaration agreed by all Member States during the UN High-level Meeting on Non-Communicable Prevention and Control, 2011, renewed the call on Member States to take actions to reduce physical inactivity. At the World Health Assembly in May 2013, Member States endorsed the need to implement actions to reach the target of a 10% reduction in physical inactivity by 2025.

At the Fifty-ninth Session of the Regional Committee, Member States passed resolution EM/RC59 which endorsed a framework for action to implement the UN Political Declaration on Noncommunicable Diseases, including the implementation of the global recommendations on physical activity and conducting mass media as one of the best buys and in this context, large-scale and sustained action through media and educational institutions.

Being physically active regularly reduces the risk of:

heart disease by 30%

diabetes by 27%

breast and colon cancers by 21%–25%.

Physical activity helps maintain a healthy weight and has a positive influence on mental health and well-being.

Related link

Factsheet on physical activity

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