

The prevalence of noncommunicable diseases in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is increasing rapidly, with unhealthy lifestyles as one of the main causes for the increase. Physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for premature death globally.

In the Region there are low levels of physical activity and a growing number of people living sedentary lifestyles. The low uptake of physical activity has a direct influence on weight gain, which in turn, amplifies the risks of developing hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

In some countries of the Region, the percentage of adults who are physically inactive exceeds 70%, with women being physically less active than men (WHO, STEPS survey). The percentage of adolescents also who are physically inactive in some countries has reached 40%.

In May 2004, the World Health Assembly endorsed resolution WHA 57.17: Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health, which calls on Member States to develop national plans to promote physical activity. Subsequently, in May 2008, the Sixty-first World Health Assembly endorsed resolution WHA61.14 dealing with the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases.

Furthermore, the Political Declaration arising out of the United Nations high-level meeting on noncommunicable disease prevention and control calls on Member States to take action to reduce physical inactivity and suggests mass education of the general public as one of the “best buys”, in other words, an intervention that is cost-effective, feasible and has health gains.

A voluntary global noncommunicable disease target has been set to reduce physical inactivity by 10% by 2025.

Health benefits of physical activity

Being physically active on a regular basis:

reduces the risk of heart disease by 30%, diabetes by 27%, and breast and colon cancers by 21%–25%.

helps maintain a healthy weight.

has a positive influence on mental health.

What is the recommended amount of exercise?

Physical activity refers to any bodily movement which uses energy and is performed as part of daily activities, such as household chores, walking, certain work and leisure-time activities, games, sports or planned exercise.

For every age bracket, WHO recommends levels of physical activity for the prevention of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, stroke and hypertension.

Children and youth aged 5–17 years

Children should perform at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity daily.

Amounts of physical activity greater than 60 minutes provide additional health benefits.

Most of the daily physical activity should be aerobic. Vigorous intensity activities should be incorporated, including those that strengthen muscle and bone, at least 3 times per week.

Adults aged 18–64 years

Adults should perform at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic physical activity

throughout the week or do at least 75 minutes of vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week.

For additional health benefits, adults should increase their moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity to 300 minutes per week, or engage in 150 minutes of vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity per week, or an equivalent combination of moderate and vigorous intensity activity.

Muscle-strengthening activities should be carried out on 2 or more days a week.

Adults aged 65 years and older

Older adults should perform at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week or do at least 75 minutes of vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week.

Aerobic activity should be performed in sessions of around 10-minutes duration.

For additional health benefits, older adults should increase their moderate intensity aerobic physical activity to 300 minutes per week, or engage in 150 minutes of vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity per week.

Older adults with poor mobility should perform physical activity to enhance balance and prevent falls on three or more days per week.

Muscle-strengthening activities, involving major muscle groups, should be done on two or more days a week.

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