

Section 3

Improving Health and Well-Being

Good health is fundamental to the ability of individuals to enjoy well-being and to realize their full human potential. It is also a crucially important economic asset. In youth, poor health is associated with challenges to learning and academic achievement as well as poor health in adulthood. Poor adult health impedes people's ability to work and earn a living for themselves and their families. It also drives up public health care costs and reduces economic productivity — both challenges for Canada in the context of its aging population and labour force.



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Increasing the Number of Active Canadians

Physical activity is critical to many aspects of health, including maintaining healthy body composition, preventing chronic disease, fostering good mental health and well-being, and promoting healthy aging. Conversely, physical inactivity is the fourth leading global risk factor for premature death.²² Globally, physically inactive adults have a 20% to 30% increased risk of death compared to people who are sufficiently active.²³ Studies have shown that increased physical activity levels, particularly high-volume and high-intensity activities, are associated with reduced premature mortality; this is true even for those with chronic health conditions.²⁴ The burden of physical inactivity is not just an individual concern: as of 2012, physical inactivity was producing an economic burden of about \$10 billion per year in Canada.²⁵

Despite the importance of physical activity, 63% of Canadian adults are unaware of Canada's physical activity guidelines.²⁶ Among Canadian adults, 54.6% are physically active,²⁷ but fewer than 1 in 5 meet the current Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines, which recommend a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per week, accumulated in bouts of 10 minutes or more.²⁸ These figures have remained roughly the same since 2007.²⁹

Sport is a fun and rewarding way to engage more Canadians in moderate to vigorous physical activity on a regular basis. Canadians are aware of this benefit: in 2016, Canadians ranked health and fitness as the second most important benefit to sport participation (69.2%).³⁰ When asked to rank their own physical health, 64.4% of Canadians who participated in sport perceived themselves to be in excellent or very good health, compared to only 46.5% of those who did not participate in sport. This trend was seen in

self-reported mental health status as well: 70.3% of sport participants perceived themselves as being in excellent or very good mental health, compared to only 59.9% of non-participants.³¹

Reducing the Burden of Chronic Disease

Physical activity plays a critical role in the prevention and management of many chronic and non-communicable diseases that rank among the leading causes of death and disability in Canada and account for a large portion of our health care spending.³²

- Cancer is the leading cause of death in Canada, responsible for nearly 1 in every 3 deaths.³³ As of 2013, approximately 3.5% of cancer diagnoses in Canada were attributable to physical inactivity; this relationship was particularly strong for women (5.3% vs 1.9% in men).³⁴
- Cardiovascular diseases are the second leading cause of death in Canada.³⁵ Frequent physical activity has been repeatedly shown to reduce both the risk of developing cardiovascular disease, as well as the likelihood of dying from a cardiovascular event.³⁶ In fact, improving fitness levels has been shown to reverse elevated cardiovascular mortality rates associated with high Body Mass Index (BMI).³⁷
- Diabetes is the sixth leading cause of death in Canada.³⁸ Individuals with insulin-dependent and non-insulin-dependent diabetes have been shown to have more stable blood sugar levels after even a single session of low-intensity physical activity.³⁹ Regular exercise can delay or prevent the development of type 2 diabetes⁴⁰, and may even reduce the number of hospital admissions for people with type 2 diabetes.⁴¹

- As of 2009, over 1.5 million Canadians aged 40 and over suffered from osteoporosis (10%).⁴² Osteoporosis has been described as “a pediatric disease with geriatric consequences,” as the critical period for strong bone development occurs during the ages of 16–25 years.⁴³ Participating in sport as a youth improves bone development to carry one throughout adulthood. Older adults who participate in physical activity, particularly resistance exercises, can also limit bone density loss and, in some cases, build bone mass.⁴⁴

Enhancing Mental Health

Mental illness is estimated to affect 1 in 5 Canadians.⁴⁵ Canadian youth are particularly affected: by the time Canadians turn 40, half have or have had a mental illness.⁴⁶ Between 2000 and 2016, the proportion of Canadians under 19 years of age using mental health services increased an average of 2.6% per year.⁴⁷ Some Canadians, including LGBTQ+ Canadians, Indigenous peoples, Black Canadians⁴⁸, individuals from the lowest-income households⁴⁹ and those with long-term chronic health conditions⁵⁰, are at even higher risk of experiencing mental illness. As of 2017, over 2 million Canadians over the age of 15 had a mental health-related disability (7.2%), the most common of which are anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and extreme stress.⁵¹ The economic burden of mental illness in Canada is estimated to be about \$51 billion per year, with expectations that this will continue to increase over the next 20 years.⁵²

Participation in any physical activity, from domestic chores to walking to playing sport, has been shown to lower psychological distress.⁵³ In patients with psychiatric disorders, physical exercise has been shown to diminish clinical symptoms, especially for depression.⁵⁴

Sport, as distinct from individual physical activity, also offers important opportunities for social relationships, friendship, and support that contribute in a significant and positive way to emotional health. When asked to assess their own mental health, over 70% of sport participants indicated that they were in excellent or very good mental health, compared to less than 60% of non-participants⁵⁵ Club-based and team-based sport participation, in particular, has been associated with better psychological and social health outcomes for adults.⁵⁶

Promoting Healthy Aging

As of 2016, the number of Canadian seniors has exceeded the number of children under 14 years of age.⁵⁷ While sport participation rates tend to decline with age, 17.8% of all Canadians over 55 still actively participate in sport.⁵⁸ This indicates only a small increase since 2010, while the proportion of the Canadian population aged 65 and over has increased substantially during the same time period.⁵⁹



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Of Canadians 65 years or older, 73% suffer from one of the top 10 most common chronic illnesses, many of which can be prevented or ameliorated through physical activity.⁶⁰ For example, Alzheimer's is the eighth leading cause of death in Canada, the risk of which increases with age.⁶¹ We know that physical activity helps with Alzheimer's prevention, and is an effective intervention for improving cognitive function.⁶² However, over 60% of seniors do not meet physical activity health guidelines.⁶³

In addition to helping prevent the onset of chronic disease, physical activity helps to improve strength, balance and coordination as people age, reducing the risk of falls and injuries, improving overall functioning and quality of life, and enabling individuals to remain independent longer.^{64,65} Sport participation also provides an important source of social connection for older Canadians who are at greater risk of social isolation once they retire from the labour force.⁶⁶

Reducing Health Care Costs

Sport's ability to engage more people in a physically active lifestyle has other important economic benefits. As of 2012, physical inactivity was costing Canadians approximately \$10 billion in combined direct and indirect costs.⁶⁷ Just a 1% relative reduction in physical inactivity would save an estimated \$20.3 billion over 20 years.⁶⁸

Reducing health care costs associated with aging should be a priority, particularly as the proportion of Canadians over 65 years of age is increasing. We know that physical activity can be protective for many conditions impacting older adults. For example, in 2016 the total financial burden of osteoporosis in Canada was estimated at \$4.6 billion, a value double earlier (2008) estimates.⁶⁹ Instituting low-cost prevention and treatment measures including the promotion of sport and physical activity could significantly reduce these national health care costs.

