

## 14 ways you can help prevent cancer



### Recommendation 4 for Policy-makers on Physical activity

- **Implement fiscal incentives for all forms of active travel.**
- **Promote and enable active public transportation for all ages and abilities, including vulnerable groups, by investing in suitable infrastructure.**
- **Enhance urban planning policies to create safer, greener environments that encourage walking, cycling and other mobility options in both urban and rural areas; strengthen the policy and design guidelines for public amenities, workplaces and social housing to enable citizens with diverse abilities to have access and be physically active in and around buildings.**
- **Introduce or reinforce physical education classes across the European Union (EU), with both curricula and infrastructure that allow for maximum inclusiveness.**
- **Promote physical activity at work with initiatives and infrastructure standards.**
- **Implement incentives for employers to provide opportunities for physical activity.**
- **Introduce physical activity on prescription in primary care as a tool for prevention of noncommunicable diseases.**
- **Work with vulnerable groups to address barriers to engaging in physical activity.**
- **Update and promote EU-wide and national physical activity guidelines.**
- **Complementing the above policy measures, implement regular public health campaigns to raise awareness of the benefits of physical activity in the prevention of cancer.**

### Executive summary

In the EU, just less than one third of adults spend at least 150 minutes per week being physically active. In addition, 46% of Europeans say that they never exercise or play sport, and 14% do so only rarely. Although more people are participating in recreational activities, people still spend a large amount of time without movement especially at work and during commutes. Physical activity includes any movement that uses the muscles and burns energy. Sedentary behaviour includes activities which do not involve much movement, such as sitting at a desk, lying on a couch, or watching television.

The prevalence of physical inactivity has major implications for the general health of the population and the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), and it is among the leading risk factors for global mortality. In 2019, in the EU, low physical activity accounted for almost 152 000 deaths and more than 2.1 million disability-adjusted life years<sup>1</sup>. Physical inactivity costs the EU Member States €80.4 billion per year, through the four major NCDs (coronary heart diseases, type 2 diabetes, and colorectal and breast cancers) and the indirect costs of inactivity-related mood and anxiety disorders. This cost could be avoided if all citizens achieved an average of 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week, which could involve simple and inexpensive activities, such as walking and running.

Government action focused on improving rates of activity in populations is essential to reduce the associated risk and burden of cancer, by reorienting environments to facilitate movement through integrated approaches, such as providing safe and green environments that encourage walking or cycling, promoting physical activity guidelines, or ensuring that physical activities are implemented in school curricula. This policy brief describes international policies and guidelines that support policy-makers and other stakeholders to implement the European Code Against Cancer, 5th edition (ECAC5) policy recommendation to address the cancer burden caused by physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour.



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### Key policy actions to improve physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviour

- **Implement fiscal incentives for active travel.**
  - Incentives for total or partial cost of bikes, parking cash-out, or provision of season tickets for public transport.

<sup>1</sup> One disability-adjusted life year equals the loss of the equivalent of one year of full health.

- **Promote and enable active public transportation for all ages and abilities, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, by investing in suitable infrastructure to create a physical activity-promoting environment.**
  - Improve walking conditions using measures such as increasing the width of pavements, increasing the presence of trees to protect against heat and sunlight, ensuring good street lighting in dark areas, providing protection from motorized traffic, and improving pedestrian crossings. Reduce speed limits in areas where people often walk.
  - Improve cycling conditions by increasing the level of protection for cyclists by separating cycle tracks from car traffic, providing good lighting, and improving the continuity of the cycle track network.
  - Work with community planners and designers, stakeholders, transportation professionals, and government agencies to design walking-friendly environments, improve traffic safety, and develop programmes that promote walking and cycling.
- **Introduce or reinforce mandatory physical education classes across the EU, with both curricula and infrastructure that allow for maximum inclusiveness.**
  - Increase teaching time for physical education (PE) during the compulsory education period, and provide high-quality physical education from preschool to higher education, including providing opportunities for physical activity before, during, and after the formal school day and including sports at school
  - The content of the PE curriculum should include physical activities for all child and adolescent maturity phases to allow for full development of neuromotor abilities and skills.
  - Students with disabilities or special educational needs should be offered tailored and adapted methodologies and activities and should not be excluded from PE classes.
- **Promote physical activity at work with initiatives and infrastructure standards.**
  - Facilitate the use of ergonomic tools, such as sit-stand desks, to promote continuous low-level activity even when seated.
- **Implement incentives for employers to provide opportunities for physical activity.**
  - Encourage employers to introduce workplace wellness programmes, including “active breaks” in which employees are encouraged to participate in group exercises, such as stretching or light aerobics. Offering rewards for meeting weekly or monthly fitness goals can also motivate employees.
- **Introduce physical activity prescriptions in primary care as a tool for prevention of NCDs.**
  - A physical activity prescription is written advice from primary health-care providers to be active. Training to healthcare providers on physical activity interventions should be provided.

- **Work with vulnerable and marginalized groups to address barriers to engaging in physical activity.**
  - Provide culturally and physically safe spaces for physical activity to increase engagement for all population groups, especially children, women, older adults, migrants, and people living in low-income neighbourhoods.
  - Support and engage in “physical activity for all” initiatives to improve access to local options for physical activity for vulnerable groups.
- **Update and promote EU-wide and national physical activity guidelines.**
- **Implement public health campaigns to raise awareness of the benefits of physical activity in the prevention of cancer.**
  - Provide evidence-based national initiatives using innovative information and communication technologies to inform populations about the benefits of physical activity.
  - Organize campaigns that combine information and tailored messages for all individuals about the importance of physical activity with other activities, such as physical activity counselling and physical activity fairs, that provide opportunities to explore various types of activities.

### Risk of cancer

- In Europe, lack of sufficient physical activity contributes to 10% of colon cancers and 9% of breast cancers.
- Regular physical activity plays a key role in cancer prevention by keeping the body’s systems, such as blood sugar regulation and the immune system, running efficiently. Physical activity helps control weight, which is crucial because higher levels of body fat can increase risks of several cancers by changing hormone levels and causing chronic inflammation.
- Excessive sitting, regardless of general physical activity levels, has been associated with an increased risk of several cancers. This suggests that it is not just the lack of exercise but also the prolonged periods of sitting that can contribute to the risk of cancer.

### Monitoring progress

Monitoring the progress of policies is crucial for evaluating their implementation and effectiveness. EU Member States can create a standardized questionnaire to assess the current status of implementation of policies in various settings (e.g. schools, workplaces). Examples of key performance indicators include development of feasible surveillance tools and methods to measure walking in various settings, such as the community, workplaces, and schools, and data collection on measures of walkability and injury for pedestrians. A physical activity questionnaire should be implemented on a regular basis to evaluate the physical activity status of the population. This would create an evidence base to guide effective and cost-effective actions to promote physical activity.

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