The Importance of Physical Activity

Physical Inactivity

Physical inactivity has become one of the most important health issues this century[1]. The ever increasing relevance of physical inactivity as a public health issue is related to the increase in non-communicable disease rates[2]. Non-communicable diseases, which include cardiovascular diseases, cancers, respiratory disorders and diabetes, are often long in duration and slow in progression[3]. These diseases often require chronic care programmes and long courses of medication that place large financial burdens upon societies and their respective health care programmes[4].

Promoting a physically active lifestyle can help to prevent and manage over 20 chronic conditions, including; coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, obesity, metal health problems and musculoskeletal conditions[5].

The Chief Medical Officer's recommend that for adults 150 minutes of moderate intensity, or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity physical activity a week be achieved[6]. For children and young people, 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity activity every day is required, including activities that strengthen muscle and bone at least three days a week[6].

The health and fitness of children and young people is increasingly recognised as a core component of public health. Children and young people establish key behaviour patterns that have important implications for their immediate and long-term health and wellbeing[6].

By helping children and young people to establish and maintain high volumes of physical activity into adulthood, there is a reduced risk of morbidity and mortality from chronic non-communicable diseases later in their lives[6]. Poor health for children and young people adversely affects the quality of life, and the physical, academic and social development of children. Additionally, poor health for children and young people may predispose to certain diseases and is often therefore predictive of poor health in adulthood[7].

Regular physical activity is associated with numerous health benefits for children and young people including reduced body fat and the promotion of healthy weight, enhanced bone and cardio-metabolic health, and enhanced psychological wellbeing[6].

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The cost of physical inactivity

Physical inactivity causes a considerable burden on health services due to the treatment of long term conditions, and associated acute events, such as strokes, heart attacks, falls and fractures in addition to the cost of social care[6]. It has been estimated that the direct cost of physical inactivity to the NHS is £1.06 billion[8]. Wider economic costs of physical inactivity such as sickness absence and premature mortality could be as high as £8.3 billion each year[9]. ukactive's 'Turning the tide of inactivity' suggests that reducing physical inactivity by 1% a year, over a five-year period would save the UK economy just under £1.2 billion[10].

Workplace Wellbeing

UK workers have an average of 9.1 days of absence a year. In the States it's 4.9 days and 2.2 days in Australia[11]. This costs UK businesses £29bn per year[11].

The most common reasons for health-related absences are musculoskeletal disorders and mental health including stress, depression or anxiety, according to Dame Carol Black, senior policy advisor on work and health to the British Government and ukactive Board member[12]. These conditions can be improved with increased physical fitness and wellbeing. A more active and healthier workforce will lead to greater individual productivity, increased job satisfaction and overall a happier and more settled workforce[13].

But fitness in the workplace is also a critical component of overall wellbeing. Research by medical journal The Lancet in July 2016 on more than one million adults found that sitting for at least eight hours a day could increase the risk of premature death by up to 60 per cent[14]. Sedentary lifestyles are now posing as great a threat to public health as smoking, and were causing more deaths than obesity. Employers have been urged to provide opportunities for their staff to be active during the work day, including in breaks and lunch hours.

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