

Physical activity as an important aspect of health at all stages of life

Nowadays, all health organizations are aware that the majority of illnesses are correlated with the style and quality of life. Among the habits most recommended to enjoy a healthy life in contemporary societies is physical activity, which is an essential component to achieve and maintain good health. On the contrary, a sedentary lifestyle, which the World Health Organization (WHO) defines as the expenditure of calories below 2,200 points per week, is associated with various health problems.

Given the importance of physical activity as a healthy habit, the WHO has made strong pronouncements on the subject. In its technical report No. 916 in 2003 on “Chronic disease prevention”, it stated that physical inactivity is a growing threat to global health both in developed and underdeveloped countries, especially among the poor who live in big cities. In another publication about non-communicable diseases in 2011, the WHO singled out physical inactivity as the fourth highest mortality risk factor in the world. Here in Brazil, the data are somewhat inconclusive, possibly because of the methodologies used to collect them, but two current studies highlight the strong prevalence of sedentarism. It affects 80% of Brazilians according to a 2010 survey published in 2012 by the IBGE. According to the Ministry of Sports, in anticipation of the Olympic and Paralympic Games to be held in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, it reported the National Sports Diagnostics of physical inactivity at 45.9%.

In all corners of the world, major sporting events are a great stimulus for the promotion of physical activity and, more often than not, elicit academic, political and media discussions on the subject. For example, before the London 2012 Olympic Games, The Lancet journal published a series of articles about physical activity – <http://www.thelancet.com/series/physical-activity> – including an analytical appraisal to quantify the effects of inactivity on major diseases. In the same vein, *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva* presents articles in this thematic issue linking physical activity with health and inactivity with illness in the various stages of life: childhood, youth, adulthood and old age. Therefore, this edition stresses that the issue in question is crucial for all age brackets, particularly when confronting the challenges of urban life styles. It also highlights the focus on physical activity, established and enshrined in the National Policy for Health Promotion, which places it as one of its priority action areas.

http://bvsm.s.saude.gov.br/bvs/publicacoes/politica_nacional_promocao_saude_3ed.pdf

Nonetheless, some clarifications are required. Physical activity is not limited to sports activities nor is a sedentary lifestyle restricted to the lack thereof. To take full advantage of physical activity, it is important to increase the level of its integration into daily life. Scholars point out that if practiced consistently and without excess, physical activity improves posture, makes muscles more efficient, helps to reduce excess weight and the accumulation of fat and increases productivity in the workplace. It is also beneficial in reducing stress and increases the propensity for everyday tasks, enhances the immune system and helps reduce the effects of various ailments such as heart disease, obesity, hypertension, osteoporosis, impaired respiratory function and variations in cholesterol levels.

Besides the above considerations, other aspects need to be considered. One such aspect is to take into account that discussions on physical activity are closely linked to the significance of the body in the world today. For this reason, this crucial issue for health and the quality of life should not be seen as a routine issue or isolated from the contemporary context in which it is featured, because the biological body is also a symbolic construction of immense significance.

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