

# BRESS Brief

## Physical Activity

### Physical Activity Benefits Health

Physical Activity is any movement produced by muscles that burn calories (energy). Adults commonly participate in physical activities on the job, around the house, during leisure time, and even for transportation. Stair climbing, housecleaning, and walking are common physical activities. Exercise, on the other hand, is planned, structured, repetitive physical activity done to improve or maintain physical conditions. Physical fitness includes a range of attributes related to physical activity. Cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular strength, endurance, flexibility, and body composition all contribute to athletic performance and health. Vigorous exercise is not necessary for physical fitness or health.

**The quantity and intensity of physical activity necessary to improve health is 30 minutes of moderate physical activity 5 or more days per week.<sup>1,2</sup>**

More intense and longer-duration activity will, in most cases, provide additional benefits.

For people just starting to be active, moderate physical activity may be easier to begin and maintain than vigorous activity. Also, the risk of orthopedic and cardiac complications will decrease when starting with less intense activity. Thus, moderate physical activity is more often suitable than vigorous activity for general populations. Any increase toward 30 minutes a day is also a healthy step.



### What Are the Benefits of Regular, Moderate Activity?

Just 30 minutes a day of moderate activity (*see box on page 2*) can offer these health benefits:<sup>1</sup>

- Reduce the risk of dying prematurely from cancer
- Reduce the risk of dying prematurely from heart disease
- Reduce the risk of developing diabetes
- Reduce the risk of injuries
- Reduce the risk of developing high blood pressure
- Reduce blood pressure in people who already have high blood pressure
- Reduce the risk of developing colon cancer
- Reduce feelings of depression and anxiety while improving sleep patterns
- Control weight
- Increase strength and balance
- Help older adults become stronger and better able to move without falling

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## How Much is Enough?

Moderate physical activity uses about 150 calories per day, or 1,000 calories per week. It is best for an individual to select a variety of activities that vary from day to day to maintain interest and involvement. Because the amount of activity is a function of duration, intensity, and frequency, longer sessions of moderate physical activity provide the same benefits as shorter more intense sessions. Some examples of moderate physical activity include:

- Playing volleyball for 45 minutes
- Walking 1 3/4 miles in 35 minutes
- Bicycling 5 miles in 30 minutes
- Swimming laps for 20 minutes
- Jumping rope for 15 minutes
- Gardening for 30-45 minutes

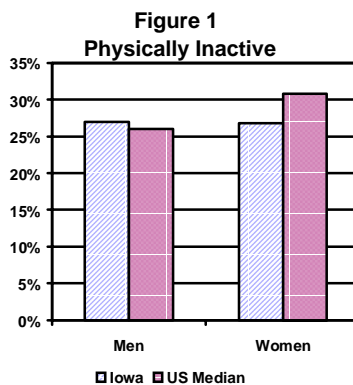
## Are Most Adults Physically Active?

According to the 1996 *Physical Activity and Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*, sedentary lifestyles are widespread in the United States and may contribute to as many as 200,000 deaths per year.<sup>(1)</sup>

## Physical Inactivity

Data from the 1996 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System<sup>3</sup> confirm that inactivity puts many Iowa adults at risk. About 26.9% of adults reported that they did not participate in any leisure time physical activity, a 6.3% decrease, from 33.5% in 1994.

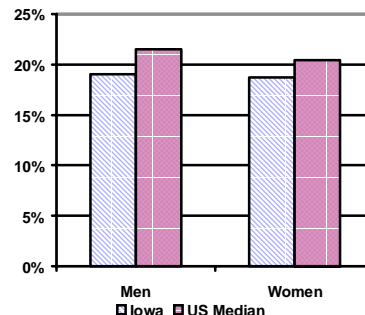
Women (26.8%) were slightly less inactive than men (27%) (Figure 1). Compared to other states, fewer Iowa women reported no leisure time physical activity in 1996.



## Physically Active Adults

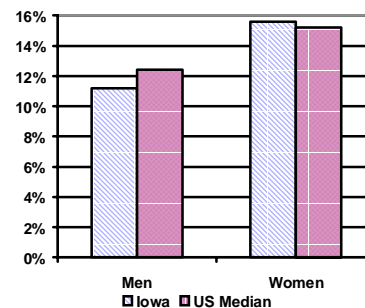
Physical activity must be performed regularly to provide benefits. The BRFSS data indicate that only about 18.9% of adults in Iowa get regular, sustained physical activity 5 or more times a week for 30 minutes or more per session. About 19% of men and 18.7% of women reported that they engaged in activity at that level (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Regular and Sustained Activity**



Few adults engage in vigorous physical activity. About 13.5% reported that they exercised at least 3 times a week for at least 20 minutes per session, at a minimum of 50% of capacity – 11.3% of men and 15.6% of women (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**  
**Regular and Vigorous Activity**



## Who Benefits from a Physically Active Lifestyle?

### Older Adults

No one is too old to enjoy the benefits of regular physical activity. Muscle-strengthening exercises can reduce the risk of falling and fracturing bones and other injuries and can improve the ability to live independently.

### Parents

Moms and dads can encourage lifelong physical activity by choosing leisure time pursuits that include opportunities for everyone in the family to be active. Physical activity can strengthen individuals and families.

### Dieters

Regular physical activity burns calories and preserves lean muscle mass.

### People with High Blood Pressure

Regular physical activity helps lower blood pressure.

### People feeling Anxious, Depressed, or Moody

Regular physical activity improves mood, helps relieve depression, and increases feelings of well-being.

### People with Arthritis

Regular physical activity can help control joint swelling and pain.

### People with Disabilities

Regular physical activity can improve stamina, muscle strength, improve psychological well-being, and quality of life by increasing the ability to perform activities of daily living.<sup>1</sup>

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**People who are usually inactive can improve their health and well-being by becoming even moderately active on a regular basis.**

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-1996 Report of the Surgeon General

## Strategies to Increase Physical Activity in the Population

Many factors work together to encourage sedentary lifestyles among adults. Social norms (the accepted way of doing things), the way communities are designed, dependence on the automobile, and the steady development of labor-saving devices are all environmental influences that contribute to the public health threat of physical inactivity. To combat this threat, strategies to create environments that support physical activity must be developed and implemented.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently brought together 25 nationally recognized researchers and practitioners in urban design, transportation, architecture, criminology, and environmental health, among others. The goals of the meeting were to identify the wide varieties of forces that influence physical activity. The group made specific recommendations for research, intervention, education, and funding opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

## What Can Communities Do?

Strategies that aim to improve the environment and impact travel may also encourage pedestrian activity. These strategies include:

*Encourage new development to support pedestrian and bicycling activity.* When housing units are mixed with retail, commercial, and office space, reliance on motor-vehicle travel decreases. Friendly streetscapes, where porches and entrances are in the foreground, vehicle traffic is slowed, and streets are narrowed encourages bicycling and pedestrian activity.

*Establish safe environments.* This strategy would include areas with signage, marked walking and cycling lanes, and lighted areas for increased safety of walkers and cyclists.

*Offer developer incentives.* Typically these are offered to encourage mixed use development, increased density, and design amenities that encourage pedestrians and bicycling.

*Location efficient mortgages.* As a way of making housing more affordable in areas that favor transit use, bicycling, and walking over vehicle travel, LEMs could enable households without vehicles to qualify for larger loans or more preferential interest rates.

*Develop interconnected street networks.* Typical suburban development relies on local streets leading to collector streets and then to major arteries. Sometimes this arrangement forms physical barriers to pedestrian and bicycle trip-making. Interconnected street networks may also reduce the travel distance and make it more likely that walking or bicycling would be substituted for a car travel.

An environment that invites physical activity has:

- Good air quality
- Opportunities for spontaneous activity
- Safety and security
- Space for shared gardens
- Regular community sponsored events that support activity
- Parks with playgrounds
- Schools and community centers open after hours for physical activity
- Well maintained streets and sidewalks
- Safe and attractive transit stations

For more information on physical activity programs in Iowa contact:

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## References

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4. Executive Summary, Panel Discussion on Policy and Environmental Actions to Promote Physical Activity: New Partners and Disciplines. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity, 1997.

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Data on adult physical activity are from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a continuous telephone survey of the adult population in Iowa supported in part by CDC and administered by the Iowa Department of Public Health. The survey collected information about exercise, recreation, or physical activity other than regular job duties performed during the previous month. Respondents were asked, "During the past month, did you participate in any physical activities or exercises such as running, calisthenics, golf, gardening, or walking for exercise?" If yes, respondents were asked to identify the two most common activities ("What type of physical activity or exercise did you spend the most time doing during the past month?") and the frequency ("How many times per month did you take part in this activity during the past month?") and duration ("When you took part in this activity, for how many minutes or hours did you usually keep at it?").

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