

## ACTION AREA 13 – Research and program evaluation

Support the implementation of physical activity initiatives through research, monitoring and evaluation

### Authors

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## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The *Blueprint for an Active Australia* is underpinned by an 'ecological' framework, which captures the constant interaction between individuals and the social, built and policy environments in which they live, work, love and play. These interactions can positively or negatively affect cardiovascular health; therefore, multi-level interventions are needed to create cardiovascular-health-enhancing policies and environments, as well as target groups, families and individuals in workplaces, schools and community settings.

This section considers the types of research and evaluation required to monitor, measure and guide these multi-level interventions. It explores general themes in evaluation, monitoring and research rather than individual study areas.

Many of the interventions proposed in the Blueprint offer multiple benefits; measuring these 'co-benefits'<sup>(1,2)</sup> will assist in quantifying the overall societal impact of the interventions. Apart from physical and mental health effects, multiple and varied outcomes should be considered, including productivity, environmental, economic and societal benefits.

The research community has an important role to play in informing the implementation and evaluating the effect of the initiatives contained in the Blueprint. To be effective, the interventions must be informed by policymakers, researchers and other professionals working together.



## WHAT MUST BE DONE?

Cooperation between the various sectors and disciplines is imperative to support informed, effective and measurable outcomes. The following measures are recommended to ensure the development, delivery and demonstrated effectiveness of physical activity programs and policies.

### **Establish interdisciplinary research teams working in collaboration with multi-sector partners, resulting in:**

- research and evaluation that is informed by policymakers and practitioners to ensure it is relevant in practice
- the selection and use of appropriate research and evaluation tools and methods (e.g. specific to the population group or location under observation)
- evaluation that considers the multiple health behaviors (e.g. physical activity, sedentary behavior, dietary intake, smoking) that impact on heart health
- research specific to the intervention being undertaken, such as active transport, sport participation and physical activity in older people.





### **Undertake policy-related research and natural experiments:**

Monitoring policy-level interventions – such as changes to built environments, the introduction of workplace sedentary behaviour guidelines or of citywide low traffic speeds – should be undertaken using a ‘natural experiment’ approach. This approach involves rigorously monitoring the effect of such changes and helps identify intended (and unintended) outcomes. It is therefore recommended that:

- natural-experiment study designs be implemented where possible to monitor before-and-after impacts, and that these studies be undertaken in accordance with best-practice guidelines<sup>(3)</sup>
- co-benefits across multiple sectors be assessed (e.g. health, education, recreation, transport and environment)
- cost-benefit analysis also be considered to quantify the value of the studied intervention
- priority is given to evaluating the impact of policies and infrastructure on inequalities in cardiovascular health outcomes.

### **Evaluate and monitor interventions that target settings, population groups or individuals:**

Researchers and policymakers should work together to identify and, where necessary, generate the evidence to inform interventions that target individuals, settings or particular population groups. Researchers should be engaged at the earliest possible stage before designing an intervention. It is recommended that:

- where evidence is absent or limited, studies are undertaken to inform how much of a particular intervention is required before change to physical activity levels are achieved (these are often called ‘dose-response’ studies)
- intervention research is undertaken to establish the effectiveness of strategies to increase physical activity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- mass-media and other campaigns are monitored and evaluated for effectiveness
- innovative interventions are designed and undertaken in partnership with policymakers and researchers to quantify the impact
- where there is limited evidence to inform practice, researchers work alongside program or policy staff to generate needed research and identify related research to inform the intervention design.

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## **REFERENCES**

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For heart health information and support,  
call the Helpline on 13 11 12 or visit  
[heartfoundation.org.au](http://heartfoundation.org.au)

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