

ACTION AREA 3 – Health care

Develop healthcare systems that promote and support physical activity participation



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The most common lifestyle issues discussed with GPs, were ‘reaching a healthy weight’ (13.6%), ‘eating healthy food or improving diet’ (11.2%) and ‘increasing physical activity’ (9.5%).



WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The primary-care sector – which includes general practitioners (GPs), Aboriginal health workers, nurses and allied health professionals – delivers the vast majority of health care in Australia,⁽¹⁾ reaching all ages and most population groups. Around 84% of the Australian population over the age of 15 attends a general practice at least once a year.⁽²⁾ This sizeable sector is often a person's first contact with the healthcare system and is considered by most a credible source of health advice.⁽³⁾ Many studies suggest that the primary-care sector can offer valued encouragement and support for physical activity.⁽⁴⁻⁵⁾ Leading health and medical organisations have endorsed the promotion of physical activity as part of routine care,⁽⁶⁻⁸⁾ and there is strong support for physical activity to be treated as a vital sign in regular patient assessments.⁽⁹⁾ The case for enabling the primary care sector to play a leading role in the promotion of physical activity is compelling.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Health Service Usage Data 2014-15 the most common lifestyle issues discussed with GPs, by those aged 15 years and over, were 'reaching a healthy weight' (13.6%), 'eating healthy food or improving diet' (11.2%) and 'increasing physical activity' (9.5%).⁽¹⁰⁾

The rationale for the engagement of healthcare workers:

- promotion of physical activity at the primary-care level has a role to play in reducing the risk of developing chronic disease or managing existing chronic health conditions
- there are well developed evidence-based resources that can be used in physical activity promotion within the healthcare setting. Common approaches include brief advice and/or counselling, referral to structured exercise programs and provision of information and printed resources
- strategies for promoting physical activity can involve a range of health professionals including GPs, practice nurses, exercise physiologists, Aboriginal health workers and other allied health professionals. Potential strategies for health professionals are detailed in the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) Redbook⁽¹¹⁾
- primary-care-based interventions solely targeting physical activity – as well as those delivered in combination with interventions for other risk factors such as diet, smoking and alcohol – have been found to be effective in recent evidence reviews⁽¹²⁻¹³⁾
- most interventions to promote physical activity in the primary-care setting are cost-effective⁽¹⁴⁾
- for people with chronic conditions such as coronary heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, arthritis and cancer, the healthcare setting is an important vehicle for promoting physical activity
- although physical activity promotion through primary health services has traditionally targeted adults, research suggests that this setting may also be an appropriate and effective setting for promoting physical activity among higher risk population groups including children, teenage girls, older adults, office workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and people from low socioeconomic and non-English-speaking backgrounds.^(11-15, 16)





WHAT MUST BE DONE?

The primary-care sector has frequent contact with people of all ages and from a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic population groups. These interactions should be better used to increase the level of physical activity participation. The following interventions are required to support the sector to fulfil its potential as a gateway to promotion of physical activity.

Implement policies that support the integration of physical activity into the primary-care sector's disease prevention and management strategies:

- ensure competencies for physical activity assessment, prescription and counselling form a mandatory part of university training for medical, nursing and allied health professionals; this foundational education should include introduction to behaviour change models, practice-based learning experiences, and promotion of physical activity among students as future healthcare practitioners⁽¹⁷⁾
- integrate physical activity and chronic disease prevention into the standard professional development programs available to health professionals; this training should include information on the health benefits of physical activity, physical activity assessment risk stratification and counselling, and exercise 'prescription' for different health conditions
- develop and disseminate guidelines and protocols for integrating physical activity assessment and promotion in the healthcare setting, including screening for physical activity as a vital sign in all health checks for children, adults, older adults and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations
- develop policies and guidelines for integrating physical activity into chronic-disease care plans and risk-reduction strategies; associated referral, counselling and follow-up support should be appropriately funded through adjustments to primary-care funding mechanisms such as the Medicare Benefits Scheme and/or Practice Incentive Payment program
- expand Medicare Benefits Scheme eligibility to allied health practitioners, practice nurses and Aboriginal health workers to cover the delivery of counselling and referral to physical activity programs
- federal government to invest in the development of accessible and affordable evidence-based physical activity programs in communities and facilitate clinical decision support systems and referral mechanisms in primary care services



- provide consumer resources in waiting rooms that will educate patients on the benefits of being physically active, for example Heart Foundation consumer material⁽¹⁸⁾
- consider the use of incentives for primary healthcare practitioners to integrate physical activity into routine protocols
- incorporate the promotion of physical activity in the healthcare setting with other national health promotion initiatives to help to support greater awareness among the general public of the physical-activity-related services available through the healthcare system
- promote the implementation of clinical guidelines such as the RACGP Redbook which currently advise that physical activity be discussed every two years for adults and opportunistically for those at higher risk, including teenage girls, older adults, office workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients, patients with low socioeconomic status and non-English speaking background, or those at high risk of a chronic condition or cancer.



Implement interventions in healthcare services to increase physical activity rates among practice populations:

- Provide information and training for primary-care practitioners on physical activity promotion:
 - › ensure all undergraduate medical students, and other health related trainees receive training on physical activity and health, including the role of physical activity in the prevention and treatment of a range of health conditions, as well as assessment and counselling on physical activity within the healthcare setting;
 - › ensure all health professionals have access to a variety of continued professional development opportunities to enhance knowledge, confidence and skills in promoting physical activity.
- Develop and disseminate clear standardised protocols for the routine promotion of physical activity in the primary-care setting:
 - › determine effective ways to use the range of primary healthcare staff, including general practitioners, practice nurses, exercise physiologists and other allied health professionals;
 - › ensure physical activity is addressed as a vital sign in all health checks, including those for children, adults, older adults and Indigenous populations;
 - › consistently incorporate physical activity into electronic medical records and the management and care plans for all patients with chronic conditions;
 - › develop feasible protocols and practice-level systems for providing follow-up support to patients related to physical activity.



- Ensure provision of affordable, safe and evidence-based physical activity programs and opportunities:
 - › health professionals should be provided with information on local opportunities to be physically active such as the Heart Foundation Walking Program;
 - › ensure that appropriate and supervised activities are available for high-risk patients who might need specialist advice and supervision while exercising;
 - › improved links between healthcare and physical activity providers should be developed so that patients are provided with opportunities that are well-matched to their interests, as well as their needs. Exercise and Sports Science Australia (ESSA) accredit physical activity providers that are qualified to assist.
- Ensure rigorous evaluation of physical activity initiatives in the primary-care setting:
 - › physical-activity-related interventions should incorporate a minimum standard of monitoring and evaluation to support an assessment of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness.



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