

Physical Inactivity: A major health risk factor in the Americas

Rapid urbanization and demographic changes in the Americas have led to important lifestyle changes, including less physical activity, poor nutritional habits, and increased tobacco use. Together, these changes are responsible for the large and rapid increase in prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCD) such as stroke, coronary heart disease, type-2 diabetes, and some cancers. According to the World Health Organization, in 1999, NCD accounted for 60% of all deaths in the world, a figure that is expected to rise to 73% by 2020. Currently 77% of all NCD occur in developing countries, unduly affecting adults in the prime of their lives.

A sedentary lifestyle is now considered one of the major contributing factors to non-communicable diseases. Nearly *three-fourths of the Region's population leads a sedentary lifestyle*, as can be observed in Figures 1 and 2. The following are some of the physical activity patterns throughout the Region of the Americas:

- Three-fourths of adults do not engage in regularly physical activity
- People of all ages lead an inactive lifestyle
- Physical activity decreases with age
- Women tend to be more inactive than men
- Low-income populations are more physically inactive

FIGURE 1: Prevalence of physical inactivity among persons 60 years and older

Physical Inactivity: not engaging in exercise or vigorous physical activity, three or more times a week
Reference: Multi-center survey in seven cities in Latin America, Salud, Bienestar y Envejecimiento (SABE), 2000

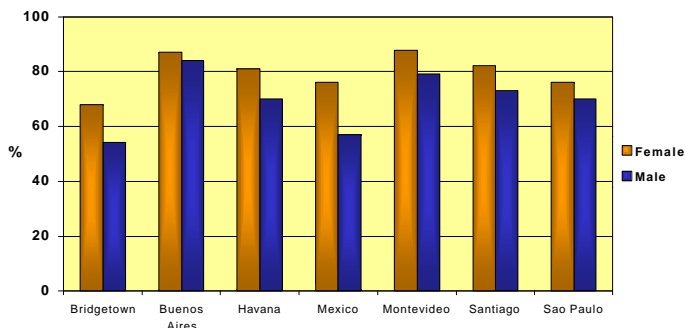
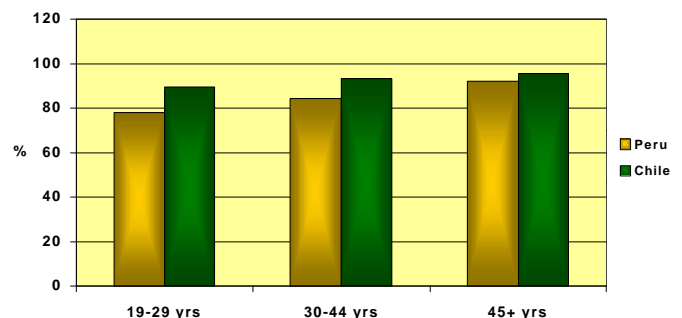


FIGURE 2: Physical inactivity in Chile and Peru by age

Peru: Inactivity defined as practicing sports, jogging or walking two times or less a month
Chile: Inactivity defined as practicing physical activity for 30 minutes two times or less a week
SOURCES: Peru: Encuesta Nacional en Niveles de Vida en Perú, 2000. Chile: Encuesta Nacional de Caracterización Socioeconómica (CASEN), 2000.



Trends among older adults show that the level of regularly physical activity is very low, partly due to the myth that older people cannot benefit from physical activity. To the contrary, physical activity significantly delays the onset of functional impairment and loss of autonomy in the older population. It is important to dispel these misleading messages and increase the level of activity among older adults.

The increase in sedentary lifestyles is not only a matter of individual choice; it is also largely a function of an environment that promotes inactivity. For example, increased motorized transportation and the development of new labor-saving devices result in people walking less often than in the past. Furthermore, in many countries, insecurity in the streets and lack of recreational public places are also important reasons why many people refrain from being more active (see Fact Sheet #5).

Given this context, a matter of high concern is the decreasing attention paid to physical education in the schools. In many Latin American countries, physical education is being pushed out of the curriculum or reduced to a poorly structured activity. Being active for life can be greatly stimulated by early adoption of the habit of exercise; therefore, the role of the school is of utmost importance.

