

Why getting active matters

Getting and staying active is critical in the primary and secondary prevention of over 20 chronic conditions and up to 40% of long-term conditions could be prevented if everyone met the UK Chief Medical Officer's physical activity recommendations.

Links between physical inactivity and disease, including cancer and poor mental health and other long-term health conditions, have been demonstrated. This is often worsened by the fact that when they develop illness they generally become even less active as well.

In children and young people physical activity plays an important role in preventing the onset of mental health illness and improves the physical and mental wellbeing in children with long-term conditions.

However:

- Approximately 34% of men and 42% of women in the UK are not active enough for good health.
- According to Public Health England (PHE), physical inactivity is understood to be responsible for 1 in every 6 UK deaths (equal to smoking).
- Physical inactivity is estimated to cost the UK £7.4 billion annually (including £900 million to the NHS alone).
- 27% of the population are classified as 'inactive', meaning they do less than 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity (such as walking) per week
- 33% of children do less than half the recommended physical activity for their age.
- We are expected to be 35% less active in 2030 than we were in 1960 based on current trends.

It is clear that physical inactivity is a major risk factor for ill-health and physical activity is protective and preventative for the population – young, old, well or those with long-term conditions. The very modest risks are far outweighed by the benefits, and GPs and their teams are ideally placed to lead by example in their communities, and have conversations about physical activity with all of their patients.

RCGP work to encourage physical activity in GP patients and staff

- **Active Practice Charter:** the RCGP have set up an Active Practice Charter which GP practices across the country can join if they can demonstrate they have introduced positive changes in their surgeries to boost staff and patient wellbeing. This is a way to encourage GP practices to make simple but impactful changes in their workplace for the benefit of staff members and demonstrate good practice to patients.
- **Parkrun:** the RCGP have collaborated with parkrun UK to promote the health and wellbeing of staff and patients. GP practices across the UK are encouraged to develop close links with their local parkrun to become parkrun practices.

- **Moving Medicine:** the RCGPs Physical Activity Team has assisted in developing this award-winning resource developed by the Faculty of Sport and Exercise Medicine (FSEM) as part of Sport England and PHEs Moving Healthcare Professional programme. The [website](#) provides a platform and structure for clinicians to have conversations about physical activity with their patients.
- **Motivate2Move:** another resource that the RCGP Physical Activity Team has assisted in developing which brings together the best available evidence for physical activity in the context of specific medical conditions. It's a free-to-access virtual textbook on everything a GP could ever want to know about physical activity.

What can GPs and primary care professionals do?

- **Encourage behavioural changes in staff and patients**
Given the high levels of patient contact and opportunities for health promotion, GPs are well positioned at the forefront of this culture-change, to encourage more people to sit less and move more in order to live longer, happier and healthier lives, as well as encouraging patients to do likewise.

In 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) released their 'Guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour'. These include specific guidance for people of all ages and abilities, but the key message is for everyone to be less sedentary as well as being more physically active. In some cases it might be most effective for healthcare professionals to move away from 'prescribing exercise' and simply encourage people to move more, because any movement is better than no movement.

- **Continue to work with social-prescribing link workers**
Many GPs already work alongside a wide range of healthcare professionals including social prescribing link workers however the Social Prescribing Observatory shows high regional variation of uptake of social prescribing services across England, which is likely to be linked to variation in workforce and services available, though further research is needed here.

What can the government do?

- **Implement a cross-government strategy to tackle health inequalities:** While we recognise that GPs are well positioned to encourage patients to move more for the benefit of their health, it must also be recognised that GPs, and wider health and social care services can only try and cure the ailments created by the environments people live in. If we are to prevent physical and mental ill health in the first place, we need to take action on issues such as poor housing, food quality, communities and place, employment, racism and discrimination, transport and air pollution. This requires the government to develop a cross-government strategy to reduce health inequalities which is a policy recommendation that the RCGP are supporting calls for as part of our membership of the Inequalities in Health Alliance (IHA).

- **Fund and support social-prescribing link workers in GP practices:** Many GPs already work alongside a wide range of healthcare professionals including social prescribing link workers, and funding has been made available to support recruitment of certain roles across Primary Care Networks. However, this funding needs to be made more flexible, as well as longer term, to provide assurances for staff contracts. Further support is also needed for effective integration of staff into practice teams, and premises need to be fit for purpose to house a wider range of staff.

Key links

- [UK Chief Medical Officer physical activity recommendations](#)
- [Summary of RCGP work on physical activity and lifestyle](#)
- [Government guidance on physical activity: applying All Our Health](#)
- [RCGP Active Practice Charter](#)
- [Further information about the Inequalities in Health Alliance](#)