

Physical Activity:
The transversal benefits for
our people, our planet, our
economy and more prosperous
societies.

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We stand for policies that enable businesses of all sizes to contribute to economic growth, sustainable development, and societal prosperity. Through *Business at OECD*, national business and employers' federations representing over 10 million companies provide perspectives to cutting-edge OECD policy debates that shape market-based economies and impact global governance. Our expertise is enriched by the contributions of a wide range of international sector organizations.

Contents

Introduction	4
Purpose	4
What are the transversal benefits of Physical Activity?	4
Trends in participation	5
Position of the private sector to promote and provide opportunities	5
Importance of multi-sectoral approaches	6
Benefits for healthier people	7
The role of physical activity in the prevention of ill-health	7
The role of physical activity to promote mental health and wellbeing	7
Economic benefits for the health sector	8
The role of the private sector	8
Benefits for a healthy planet	11
Physical activity and environmental sustainability	11
Economic benefits for a sustainable environment	11
The role of the private sector	12
Benefits for a healthy and productive workforce	14
The role of physical activity on a healthier workforce	14
Economic benefits to employers and the economy	15
The role of the private sector	15
Tax alleviation to enhance accessibility and affordability of physical activities	16
Benefits for education, skills and employability	19
The role of physical activity in improving education & skills	19
Economic benefits for education, skills and employability	20
The role of the private sector	20
Key conclusions, policy recommendations and guidance for policy makers	22
Conclusions	22
Policy recommendations, available guidance and tools to support society to be more physically active	22
Appendix A: Useful policy tools, resources and further reading	24

Introduction

Purpose

This paper serves as an important resource for *Business at OECD (BIAC)*, and its OECD Member Governments and other policy makers to raise awareness of the benefits of physical activity on our society and to position physical activity as a low-cost, high return investment to help solve many of today's global challenges. This paper builds on previous reports published by OECD and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2023¹ with updated sources of evidence to encourage a more consistent and clear articulation of the benefits of a more active society. The paper can also be used to make the business case for greater investment by Governments and the private sector in physical activity as a preventative intervention for health. The benefits of physical activity apply across all of OECD's priority areas of work, not just physical health, but also mental health, environment, sustainable transport, the economy, skills and employment. The paper highlights the importance of an intersectoral approach and in particular, the role of the private sector in supporting other sectors, including governments and civil society, to tackle this growing crisis.

What are the transversal benefits of Physical Activity?

Physical Activity, defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure², has a wealth of benefits for people, planet and society and is a key intervention that can help achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and generate an economic return. Physical activity is the action of moving our bodies, whether that's walking, dancing, cycling, gardening, doing household chores, or playing recreational and competitive

sports. WHO recommends at least 60 minutes of moderate-to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily for children and adolescents, and for adults, at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity physical activity, combined with weight training, to maintain good health.

Despite the vast collection of evidence of the broad benefits of physical activity³ alongside reports jointly published by WHO, OECD and others calculating a 4 to 1 economic and social return on investment global trends indicate participation levels are in decline. There is a real threat that inactivity in our young people will become a major financial and societal burden in the future as sedentary lifestyles become the norm. Evidence of the benefits of physical activity is clear and quantifiable but the role of physical activity as a cost-effective intervention to solve many of today's global challenges is overlooked. There is an urgent need for heightened awareness of the benefits of physical activity across both public and private sectors in order for effective policy-led action to be implemented.

In OECD's report on *Physical activity among adults*⁴, the Organization highlights the significant health and economic impacts of physical inactivity across Europe. The report shows that a lack of physical activity is linked to increased risks of chronic diseases, higher healthcare costs, and reduced workforce productivity. Physical inactivity among adults varies widely by country, influenced by socio-economic factors, lifestyle, and policy initiatives. To counteract these trends, the OECD suggests that countries implement more inclusive policies promoting physical activity, such as expanding active transport infrastructure, supporting recreational sports, and integrating activity-promoting measures into healthcare systems.

Trends in participation

In June 2024, updated statistics for global participation levels of physical activity in adults were published in *The Lancet*⁵. The results were interpreted and summarized by WHO in their report: *Global levels of Physical Activity in Adults – off track for 2030*⁶, which reported that globally, nearly one third of adults (31%) are not meeting WHO's recommended levels of physical activity which is at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity per week. Although physical inactivity among adults varies widely by country, influenced by socio-economic factors, lifestyle, and policy initiatives, these data revealed that this is 1.8 billion people missing out on the broad benefits of physical activity. The WHO data revealed trends showing only two WHO regions of nine are showing improvements in physical inactivity trends. Countries in Central Asia and North Africa/ Middle East in particular are areas where there are high levels of inactivity

WHO is expected to publish updated participation data for young people and adolescents in due course. The most recent study on adolescents⁷, published in 2019, reported that 81% of adolescents globally are not doing enough physical activity to maintain good health. The vast majority of our younger generation are leading inactive lives which, without urgent action, will lead to this generation becoming an economic and social burden on society.

points⁸. However, in a third of countries, the difference between women and men exceeded 10 percentage points.

The statistics illustrate that this is not a temporary setback or a spike in inactivity associated with the global Covid-19 pandemic. Since 2010, levels of global physical inactivity in adults have been consistently rising from 26% to 31% and by 2030, WHO projects that inactivity levels will reach 35%. The world is very clearly not on track to meet the global target, set out in WHO's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity⁹ of a 15% relative reduction in physical inactivity by 2030.

Position of the private sector to promote and provide opportunities

The private sector is well positioned to support global efforts to raise participation levels in regular physical activity. It has a wealth of knowledge of consumer behaviors, a powerful influence across many sections of society, significant investment capabilities and perhaps most importantly, the incentive to see a healthier population contributing positively rather than negatively to the world's economy. Fitness facilities play a critical role in delivering structured exercise opportunities, tailored to diverse demographic and health needs, positioning them as vital contributors to improving public health.

The Business at OECD (BIAC) perspective aligns with the OECD's stance, viewing physical

"A multi-sectoral strategy is essential to reverse current trends. To succeed, all sectors, including the private sector, must collaborate more closely, deepen their understanding of physical activity's benefits, and clarify their roles in achieving shared societal outcomes."

In addition to disparities in trends according to age, WHO also reports in its summary, that globally, more women (34%) compared to men (29%) fell short of global recommendations on physical activity — a difference of 5 percentage

activity as an essential part of preventive health strategies, with potential impacts across economic and social sectors. *Business at OECD (BIAC)* advocates that physical activity should be treated as "preventive medicine," stressing that

policies promoting active lifestyles are beneficial to both physical and mental health, reducing the prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and supporting mental well-being.

Business at OECD (BIAC) also emphasizes the need for policies that go beyond individual responsibility, suggesting that governments should create enabling environments that make physical activity more accessible and equitable. Disparities in access, including safe infrastructure for activities like cycling or walking, access to safe public open spaces, limited transportation options, and economic barriers, should be addressed. Fiscal policies, such as tax incentives, subsidies, and investments in the physical fitness sector, could help make these opportunities more accessible. Importantly, *Business at OECD (BIAC)* recommends that inter-ministerial collaboration (including health, education, planning and transport, and economy sectors) should remove systemic barriers to active lifestyles. Education and workplace initiatives, especially targeting children, play a critical role in fostering lifelong healthy habits.¹⁰

Importance of multi-sectoral approaches

Addressing the challenge of rising physical inactivity requires a whole-system approach that engages individuals and communities while considering diverse influences such as family, peers, education, cultural norms, government policy, workplaces, and personal attitudes. A multi-sectoral strategy is essential to reverse current trends. To succeed, all sectors, including the public and private sectors, must collaborate more closely, deepen their understanding of the benefit of physical activity, and clarify their roles in achieving shared societal outcomes.

Acknowledgment

This paper was prepared by *Business at OECD (BIAC)*, drawing on input from its member federations, corporate members, and Associate Expert Group (AEG) members, with particular acknowledgment to the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry (WFSGI) for their significant contributions, alongside valuable input from other members

Benefits for healthier people

The role of physical activity in the prevention of ill-health

Physical activity can be used as a high-impact, low-cost tool to help achieve SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages) and in particular, Target 3.4 – “by 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being’.

The evidence available on the health benefits of physical activity is clear. WHO reports that regular physical activity can prevent noncommunicable disease (NCDs) for example heart disease, type-2 diabetes and cancer, which cause nearly three quarters of deaths worldwide¹¹. The NCD Alliance goes further to report that the leading NCDs are driven in a large part by modifiable risk factors that often emerge in childhood and adolescence, including physical inactivity¹². It is estimated that 80 per cent of NCDs are preventable if risk factors are better controlled. Physical activity can also help manage chronic conditions such as hypertension and type-2 diabetes, prevent disease progression and improve quality of life for those living with NCDs¹³.

Obesity and being overweight are major risk factors contributing to ill-health and NCDs. In 2022, according to WHO, one-eighth of the global population was living with obesity, and rates of adult obesity have more than doubled since 1990 and rates of adolescent obesity have quadrupled¹⁴. Obesity and being overweight are complex conditions caused by a range of factors, but a major risk factor is low levels of physical activity. This is an area of significant

concern, particularly due to the rising levels of childhood obesity and the high proportion (81%) of adolescents that do not do enough physical activity to maintain good health.

Without clear action, it is likely this situation will get worse. Being overweight in childhood and adolescence is associated with the risk of earlier onset of various NCDs and can have damaging psychosocial consequences. Obesity affects school performance and quality of life and children with obesity are very likely to become adults with obesity with a higher risk of developing NCDs in adulthood¹⁵. Healthy eating’s link to obesity often overshadows the equally important role of physical inactivity. Developing healthy activity and eating habits early is vital. Public and private sectors should engage young people directly to drive effective solutions.

The role of physical activity to promote mental health and wellbeing

The positive benefits of physical activity on mental health and wellbeing through reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression are also well evidenced. Regular physical activity can help people to relax and de-stress and bring a sense of fun and joy, improving mental resilience and preventing cognitive decline¹⁶. Where and how people exercise can produce additional rewards through positive social connections associated with group exercise and exercising outdoors which provides the added mental and emotional benefits of being in nature.

Business at OECD’s Health Forum Synthesis Report published in 2024¹⁷, as a contribution to the 2024 OECD Health Ministerial Meeting, highlighted the role of physical activity alongside

other preventive measures that bolster health resilience. The importance of adopting a more robust and consistent preventative approach to health, including physical activity, was underlined but acknowledged that it is at risk of being overlooked by the rising pressures and constraints on the global health system and the absence of an effective cross-sector approach.

Economic benefits for the health sector

Beyond the human and societal costs of disease, disability, and premature deaths, physical inactivity also imposes major economic costs, due to health expenditures and productivity losses. The WHO's most recent estimates indicate that the current physical inactivity levels will cause 500 million new cases of preventable NCDs and an additional USD 300 billion in treatment costs alone from 2020-2030¹⁸. *Step up! Tackling the Burden of Insufficient Physical Activity in Europe*¹⁹, jointly produced by the OECD and WHO Europe, makes the economic case for investing more in physical activity policy. It shows the potential impact that increasing physical activity levels would have on population health and the economy: increasing the life expectancy of people who are insufficiently active by 7.5 months, preventing more than 10 000 premature deaths per year, and saving European Union Member States a total of PPP 8 billion EUR per year.

These exorbitant costs, attributed largely to preventable conditions which could be avoided if the world was moving more, are unacceptable. Investments in access to fitness facilities and structured exercise programs have shown significant cost savings by reducing the prevalence of non-communicable diseases and improving mental health outcomes²⁰. More urgency must be given to making it easier for people to lead more active lives and finding innovative and cross-sector solutions to this issue.

The role of the private sector

The private sector's potential to address physical inactivity has been underutilized, missing opportunities to leverage its expertise in consumer behavior, product innovation, and program delivery. This paper advocates for greater investment by governments and businesses in physical activity as a preventive measure. Progress includes WHO's collaboration with the private sector, such as its MoU with the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry (WFSGI) in 2023 and a Joint Industry Statement in 2024²¹ signed by 25 top sports brand CEOs, showcasing unified action to combat rising inactivity levels.

Case example 1: Body Confident Sport – an initiative by Nike

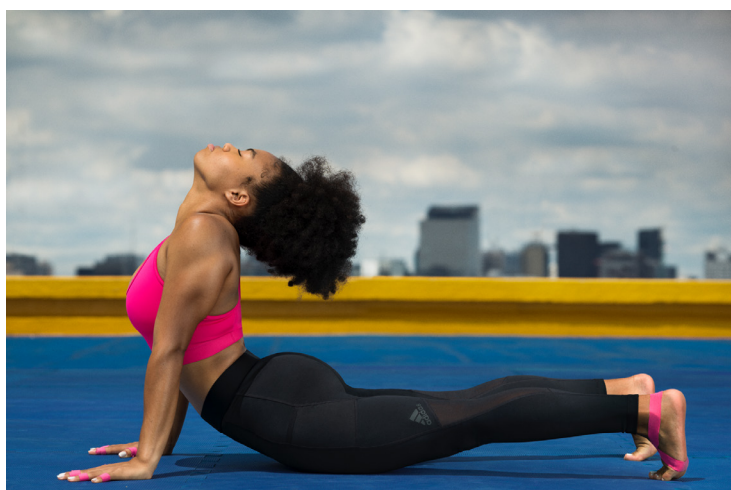
By adolescence, 49% girls drop out of sport at a rate 6 times faster than boys. Low body confidence is the biggest reason girls drop out of sport. Nike, the biggest champion of athletes and sport, and Dove, the world's biggest provider of self-esteem and body confidence education, teamed up to give coaches the tools they need to empower girls for a lifetime of confidence. Body Confident Sport – a first-of-its-kind, evidence-based set of coaching tools – is designed by the Tucker Center for Girls and Women in Sport and the Center for Appearance Research, to leverage sport to



help build body confidence in girls ages 11-17. It is currently available in 7 languages. Since its launch about 12 months ago, the digital platform www.bodyconfidentsport.com has been used by 115,000 coaches, with over 12,000 coaches trained digitally or in-person through partnerships with international sport organizations, such as TAFISA, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, Youth Sport Trust International.

Case example 2: Teenage drop out from physical activity and adaptive sportswear by Adidas

Girls and women are more likely to drop out of sports than men, prompting adidas to address this through campaigns, research, and tailored products. Initiatives include the Bra Revolution for better-fitting sports bras, period-proof tights to ease fears of leaks, and free educational resources on menstruation. For pregnant and postpartum women, adidas developed specialized maternity gear to support comfort, activity, and breastfeeding needs, demonstrating a commitment to empowering women at every stage.



Case example 3: Promoting an active lifestyle in Spain. The Case of “AlimentActivos” – an initiative from the Spanish Food and Drink Federation.

In 2020, the Spanish Food and Drink Federation, FIAB, launched an awareness campaign to promote healthier and more active lifestyles among consumers – “SomosNutrisensatos” (“We are NutriSensible”), which serves as a bigger frame for the “AlimentActivos” (which could be translated as “We are foodie and active people”) movement. Since then, FIAB has not only continued feeding the website, but has also engaged with younger audiences through social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, X, or YouTube). Different contents (from those on physical activity, to others that – for

example – remind people about the importance of sleeping) are delivered in different formats such as short videos, calls for action, or images. Because the overall goal of the campaign is to inspire and nudge people to live in the best and healthiest way possible, the messages are designed to plant the seed on people’s mind about the importance of maintaining an active lifestyle and healthier habits, so that – at the end – they can start moving towards a healthier version of themselves.

Benefits for a healthier people takeaways

- Physical activity can be used as a high-impact, low-cost tool to reduce NCDs and improve mental and physical and social health, and well-being.
- One in three adults and 81% of adolescents do not do enough regular physical activity to maintain good health. Being overweight in childhood and adolescence is associated with greater risk of earlier onset of various NCDs and affects school performance and quality of life.
- The WHO’s most recent estimates indicate that the current physical inactivity levels will cause 500 million new cases of preventable NCDs and an additional USD 300 billion in treatment costs alone from 2020-2030.

Benefits for a healthy planet

Physical activity and environmental sustainability

Climate change and rising ill-health are interconnected, sharing drivers and solutions. Poor health and physical inactivity reduce resilience to climate impacts. Extreme weather and poor air quality hinder physical activity by damaging infrastructure and increasing health risks, particularly as polluted air intake rises during outdoor exercise.

Policy action that enables physical activity, through walking and cycling can directly contribute towards SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and in particular Target 11.2: 'by 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all'.

There is available evidence indicating that key modes of sustainable transport, including active mobility (e.g. cycling and walking) will help reduce carbon emissions. A 2015 study²² found that a 11% combined cycling/e-bike share of urban passenger travel distance worldwide by 2030 would cut CO₂ emissions from urban transport by about 7%, rising to a 14% combined cycling/e-bike share and a near 11% reduction by 2050.

Modern transport systems and the over-reliance on personal motorized vehicles is contributing to ill-health, not just through air pollution, but through traffic injuries and deaths and poor health due to an over-reliance on motorized transport as opposed to other modes of active transport that can promote physical activity²³. Reshaping transport mobility with a focus on more sustainable modes will dramatically reduce health risks while protecting the environment and

mitigating the impacts of climate change²⁴.

The physical activity and sport sector relies on the natural environment and must help combat climate change. Participants can reduce their carbon footprint and use their platforms to advocate for environmental action. Regular use of green spaces for activity highlights their value and supports their preservation. The World Economic Forum's nature-positive coalition urges businesses to lead in sustainability, emphasizing their reliance on natural systems and the need for a nature-positive economy. Understanding that these opportunities are not universally applicable, fitness facilities also provide an alternative for structured indoor exercise, especially in areas affected by poor air quality or extreme weather, ensuring consistent access to physical activity.

Economic benefits for a sustainable environment

Reducing transport demand while promoting low-carbon options can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and air pollution, while improving citizens' physical health. All these have significant economic benefits. In 2016, the European Cycling Federation published a report classifying and partially quantifying the benefits of cycling in the EU²⁵. The report found that every year, cycling in 28 EU Member States creates economic benefits of 513 billion EUR, that is more than 1000 EUR per inhabitant demonstrating that the benefits of cycling arise not only in specific, isolated fields like transport or environmental policy, but also in employment, health and social policy. The benefits of cycling even extend to such societal areas as integration of refugees, access to mobility and employability. One study in the

UK found that the potential health benefits of increased walking and cycling in urban England and Wales could lead to savings of nearly 1% of the yearly budget for healthcare by reducing the prevalence of multiple diseases²⁶. This study showed how policy-led approaches by local and national governments promoting bike-sharing schemes, cycle parking, training and education, low traffic neighborhoods, e-bike grants, a workplace parking levy, and increased use of a 'cycle-to-work' scheme would generate financial benefits of up to 11.28 billion EUR. By transitioning to a healthier transport system – one designed around humans, not vehicles – we can ensure these economic benefits are equitably distributed to all²⁷.

The private sector must therefore continue and increase its efforts to display climate leadership by engaging actively and collectively in the climate neutrality journey and this call to action has been clearly recognized by the UNFCCC and in the UN's Sport for Climate Action Framework²⁹. The Framework highlights that climate change leadership can help to differentiate from competitors, build brand reputation and engage brand ambassadors, employees and other stakeholders on environmental issues.

The cycling industry also recognized its unique and influential role in supporting active mobility through the provision of affordable bikes that are more accessible to people wishing to

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The role of the private sector

Private sector businesses are engaged in finding tangible ways to respond to the challenges of climate change. Action is focused on commitments to renewable energy, greening supply chains and investing in climate-resilient goods and services.

Private sector organizations involved in delivering and promoting competitive sport have an unparalleled global platform of influence on climate change issues. The billions of committed and engaged sports fans and participants can be leveraged to advocate for a change in people's attitudes and behaviors towards climate issues. For example, pledges have been made by the IOC²⁸ to use its influence to encourage private sector stakeholders and Olympic fans to act against climate change.

transfer from car to bike. Bike share schemes, often sponsored by the private sector, are also providing effective solutions to combining public transport and cycling. To reach its full potential, cycling including bike sharing, needs to be properly addressed in mobility policies at all levels of Government. Cycling Industries Europe, in its recent Bike Sharing Report 2024³⁰, recommends policy improvements across governance and funding, transport planning, awareness raising, allocation of space, safety regulations and adequate infrastructure, including a special focus on persons with disabilities or reduced mobility.

Case example: Cycling Industry and European Declaration on Cycling

In April 2024, the European Council, Commission and Parliament signed the European Declaration on Cycling, the most ambitious EU initiative to date which recognised cycling as one of the “most sustainable, accessible and inclusive, low-cost and healthy forms of transport and recreation, and its key importance for European society and economy.” The declaration aims to double cycling in Europe by 2030. The declaration is a direct result of collaborative efforts from civil society, the cycling industry and governmental institutions. Private sector contributors to this declaration included Cycling Industries Europe, the European Cyclists Federation and the Confederation of the European Bicycle Industry.

Benefits for a healthier planet takeaways

- The physical activity and sport sector is dependent on nature for the provision of outdoor recreation spaces, pitches and trails, and therefore must ensure it plays its part in protecting the planet from further impacts of climate change.
- Private sector organisations involved in sport have an unparalleled global platform of influence on climate change issues. Billions of committed and engaged sports fans and participants could be leveraged to advocate for climate issues.
- Reducing transport demand while promoting low-carbon options can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and air pollution, while improving citizens’ physical health. All these have significant economic benefits.
- By transitioning to a healthier transport system – one designed around humans, not vehicles – we can also create economic benefits that can be equitably distributed to all.

Benefits for a healthy and productive workforce

The role of physical activity on a healthier workforce

The benefits of physical activity on the workforce are two-fold, with clear benefits for the employee and the employer. There is significant evidence of the positive benefits of physical activity on our health and therefore, for employees,

target 8.2 - 'achieving higher levels of economic productivity'.

Promoting healthy habits in the younger generation, including physical activity, will ensure a robust foundation of positive wellbeing habits and good health underpinning the future workforce which will enable greater competitiveness

"Without a healthy workforce or a healthy society, an economy's competitiveness will be significantly undermined and will be more vulnerable to societal shocks such as potential future pandemics and climate change."

participating in more regular physical activity can improve employees' sense of well-being, reduce stress and improve general feelings of happiness and job satisfaction. The benefits of more healthy employees include a reduction in staff turnover, increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, improved staff morale and improved corporate image³¹. A workplace that prioritizes healthy behaviors with incentives for physical activity, is more likely to attract and retain talented employees.

Without a healthy workforce or a healthy society, an economy's competitiveness will be significantly undermined and will be more vulnerable to societal shocks such as potential future pandemics and climate change. People can only realize their productive potential in their place of work if they are in good health – physically and mentally. A healthy workforce can directly help to achieve SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and

and stronger economies. There is, however, a significant risk that the younger generation, of which 81% are not currently active enough for good health, will in fact become less healthy than their parents and place increased burden on health and social care systems in the future causing a negative impact on competitiveness and economies. Adults spend about one-third of their lives at work, giving employers a crucial role in promoting healthier lifestyles. It also impacts the health of families, communities, and society. It is essential for employers to implement effective health initiatives that encourage physical activity among employees and their families.

Employers who implement workplace health and well-being programs, in addition to preventing occupational risks, can reduce health care spending, decrease sickness absenteeism and increase work productivity. Integrating fitness facility memberships or on-site structured exercise

programs into workplace wellness strategies can further enhance employee engagement and health outcomes. For instance, based on OECD models³², scaling up programs to address sedentary behaviors and promote physical activity at work could improve employment and productivity equivalent to having an increase of 37 000 workers per year in 30 OECD countries, with a positive economic return of USD 4 for each USD invested. Promoting employees' health also strengthens the corporate image – which helps recruit and retain talent – and may increase employees' satisfaction and work engagement. In this regard, *Business at OECD (BIAC)* supports continued OECD research on sedentary behaviors and the importance of physical activity.

Economic benefits to employers and the economy

Delving deeper into the specific impacts of an unhealthy workforce, there are several negative impacts on the wider economy and society due to lost productivity, a reduction in income tax receipts, increases in long-term sickness, increased informal caregiving and increased healthcare costs.

According to a joint report by the World Economic Forum and the McKinsey Global Health Institute, improving global employee health and well-being could create up to USD 11.7 trillion in global economic value³³. McKinsey Global Health Institute's analysis went on to estimate that the total value created by initiatives to improve employee health and well-being could equate to up to USD 3,500 per employee.

If these estimates were broadened to incorporate productivity losses in the workplace, the cost burden of physical inactivity would be much higher. Conversely, increasing physical activity rates would have significant economic benefits for the health sector with reduced reliance on treatment for conditions that can largely be prevented through a healthier lifestyle. One study estimates that if all adults met the WHO's recommended

level of physical activity, it would increase global GDP by up to USD 446 billion annually, adding up to USD 8.6 trillion cumulatively to global GDP from 2020-2050³⁴.

The role of the private sector

There are several ways the private sector can support the promotion of healthier workforces through physical activity and improved well-being. Specialist services can be supplied by companies offering solutions for employers with a focus on workforce health. These services will often be integrated into employee support schemes and healthcare plans.

There are also partnerships between companies and health insurers that can offer incentives to employees to lead more active healthy lives. At present, these approaches do not often include physical activity opportunities that are accessible and meaningful to employees (other than for example, a discounted gym membership, which is not appealing or accessible to everyone). Instead, there is a greater focus on mindfulness and improving mental health through meditation apps, coaching and signposting to more specialist support services. Whilst this support is important, as the world continues to recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a missed opportunity for employers to prioritize employees' physical health by encouraging more activity during and around the working day.

Workplace initiatives that promote modes of active travel to and from work are significant as not only will active travel improve employee health, but it is also likely that this will save employees money and reduce the impact of motorized forms of transport on the environment. There are also a whole range of options that an employer can consider including staff clubs at lunchtime, on-site group exercise classes, encouraging walking meetings and standing desks.

Small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are particularly vulnerable to missing out on opportunities to support their employees to be

active due to diversity of staff and limitations in certain workplace contexts. WHO Europe has published guidance³⁵ for businesses in the private sector (particularly SMEs) on how to create a menu of physical activity options that can be appealing to a wide range of employees in different contexts.

Tax alleviation to enhance accessibility and affordability of physical activities

Fiscal policies that reduce the cost burden of physical activity for individuals are a powerful tool to increase accessibility and boost participation. Research shows that tax relief on memberships and physical activities, such as gym or swimming pool access, can encourage individuals to adopt healthier lifestyles by reducing financial barriers³⁶.

For example, Ireland has implemented tax relief for fitness memberships, aiming to promote public health while potentially reducing healthcare costs associated with lifestyle diseases. This initiative is an example of a proactive approach that both lowers public health expenditure and promotes widespread access to fitness opportunities³⁷.

Similarly, Portugal offers tax credits for physical activity expenses, a policy that serves to lower economic barriers for citizens aiming to maintain an active lifestyle: “30% of the VAT incurred by any household member with sports and recreational activities, sports club, and gyms/fitness club expenses, if included on invoices communicated to the tax authorities, being comprised within the global household limit”³⁸.

Evidence from these cases supports the argument that tax relief on physical activities can lead to higher participation rates, alleviating long-term public health costs and supporting government initiatives for a healthier, more active society.

Case example 1: ASICS Movement for Mind programme proven to improve mental wellbeing

Research shows that people and workforces are more stressed than ever before. But could movement be a simple way for the world to feel better? To find out, ASICS undertook one of the largest, independent, randomised control trials of its kind and proved that a simple, movement-based programme could meaningfully improve mental wellbeing. Those following the ASICS Movement for Mind programme reported improved mental wellbeing on the internationally recognised Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale. The trial, led by Dr Brendon Stubbs, 'proves the impact of the simple, eight-week ASICS Movement for Mind programme where people walk or run for just 30 minutes, twice a week.' As a result, ASICS has made the audio programme available to everyone to help boost wellbeing. Additionally, ASICS' global study shows that workers' mental state starts to decline after only two hours of continuous desk-based working, with stress levels rising significantly after four hours. However, a new Desk Break experiment, shows that just 15 minutes of movement can help reverse the effects. The experiment found that when office workers added just 15 minutes of movement into their working day, their mental state improved by 22.5%. Ahead of World Mental Health Day on 10 October 2024, ASICS delivered a warning to the world to get away from their desks and move for their mental health in a powerful Public Service Announcement (PSA) TheDeskBreak. The result? Millions of views, leading to workers around the world taking a #DeskBreak on World Mental Health Day.



Case example 2: The YuLife Employee App | YuLife

Investing in employee wellbeing is not just a moral imperative—it's a business strategy that delivers measurable results. Studies have shown that every USD 1 invested in mental health programs generates a USD 4 return in productivity (WHO, 2016), while wellness initiatives can reduce absenteeism costs by USD 2.73 for every USD 1 spent (Health Affairs, 2010). With 80% of chronic diseases linked to lifestyle factors (AMA and Archives Journals), promoting healthier habits through programs like YuLife not only enhances individual health but also mitigates long-term healthcare costs. Highly engaged employees drive 18% greater sales revenue (Gallup, 2020), and happier employees are 13% more productive during work hours (Oxford University, 2019).

YuLife leverages these insights, helping companies foster healthier, happier, and more engaged teams. YuLife was built by a team of innovators with deep expertise across insurance, wellbeing and gaming technology to incentivise simple, everyday healthy habits (walking, cycling, exercising, meditation), encouraging prevention and driving sustainable wellbeing improvement. Over 89% of employees report improved wellbeing through YuLife's gamified services, empowering organizations to create thriving workforces and achieve sustainable success. The company has raised over USD 200 million and successfully partnered with leading insurance providers in the UK including Bupa and MetLife.

Benefits for a healthy and productive workforce takeaways

- With 1.3 billion people in the formal workforce spending nearly one-third of their life at work, employers have a unique and critical role to play to promote healthier lifestyles among their workforce as well as their families and wider communities.
- If the younger generation can be effectively influenced to develop positive physical activity habits, there will be a robust foundation of good health underpinning the future workforce.
- Businesses can support their workforce through offering services such as gym facilities or memberships, lunchtime exercise classes, walking meetings, standing desks, cycle-to-work schemes etc.
- If all adults met the WHO's recommended level of physical activity, it would increase global GDP by up to USD 446 billion annually, adding up to USD 8.6 trillion cumulatively to global GDP from 2020-2050³⁹.

Benefits for education, skills and employability

The role of physical activity in improving education & skills

SDG 4 (Quality Education) has targets to substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship along with literacy and numeracy. Physical activity and specifically physical education can play a critical role to help achieve these targets.

There is consistent and compelling evidence that regular physical activity, including through sport, can deliver significant benefits for child development, children at school, young adults in further education and adults seeking employment. Physical activity and sport can help develop vital physical and health literacy including fundamental movement skills, self-confidence,

In the education system, physical activity contributes positively to outcomes including attendance and enrolment (studies⁴⁰ cite an increase in attendance by 20%), attainment across various subjects (an increase in test scores by 40%) and attitudes and behaviors toward school and learning (up to 57% improvement). Physical activity stimulates the development of relevant cognitive skills, such as executive planning, attention, simultaneous and successive tasks, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and social competence and capital. These skills, in turn, can promote the enhancement of educational performance and academic resilience, improvements in attendance, drop-out propensity, progression to higher education, and higher prosocial behaviors related to school and learning.

“Physical activity stimulates the development of relevant cognitive skills, such as executive planning, attention, simultaneous and successive tasks, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and social competence and capital.”

motivation, leadership, persistence and resilience. Playing regular sports can also embed notions of fair play, a cooperative mindset, and teamwork inclinations. These skills are relevant to navigating job application processes and to the work environment. Furthermore, being physically active fosters socialization, expands social networks, and opens new sources of information, leading to job opportunities and an enhanced capability to seize them.

UNESCO strongly advocates for the implementation of Quality Physical Education (QPE) policy in all education settings to maximize the potential that sport can have on education achievement, skills and employability. QPE is not simply a good standard of PE delivered in schools, it is about the value and content of physical education curricular and rounded development of physical literacy which can enhance educational and employability outcomes.

UNESCO's report on the Social Impact of Sport provides evidence to prove the impact of sport and physical activity on social outcomes including education, skills development, and employability. The report highlights that sport and physical activity participation can impact better wages when practiced consistently throughout life. As the previous section has outlined, improved health and well-being can lead to direct gains in individual productivity, such as efficiency, and other soft skills like endurance, stress management, and group work – valued characteristics rewarded in the labor market that can lead to better jobs, better remuneration and promotions.

Research led by EY⁴¹ on female athletes and leaders found that when entering the boardroom, women athletes have a unique advantage by thriving on competition, determination, and a strong work ethic. Their findings showed that 94% of C-suite women have played sports when they were younger, demonstrating that sport participation can propel women into successful business careers. Additionally, sport participation helps girls grow up healthy and confident, helps young female leaders rise, and helps C-suite leaders succeed.

Economic benefits for education, skills and employability

There are direct links between physical activity and education, skills and employability that bring about tangible economic benefits for individuals and for economies.

For individuals, a study found that people actively participating in sport and physical activity increased their earnings by about 1,200 EUR per year over a 16-year period compared to more inactive people⁴². This same study found that in Canada, increasing the level of sport and physical activity to a level higher than the one recommended by health organizations influenced earnings comparable to that of one or two years of additional schooling⁴³. Another

study in the US found that those who engaged in regular exercise earned salaries between 6% and 10% higher than sedentary people⁴⁴.

There is a wealth of evidence, including studies cited in this paper, that increasing physical activity improves educational results, delivers great skills, and increases employability. Lessons learned from these studies indicate that the most positive economic effects are derived from structured and intentional sport and physical activity programs that are designed to deliver the outcomes for education, skills and employability. But the alarming statistics reported by WHO⁴⁵ that 81% of adolescents do not do enough physical activity means a significant missed opportunity to secure these key benefits.

The role of the private sector

The private sector will directly benefit from more children and young people taking up regular physical activity through the creation of a new generation of healthier young people that leave school with better qualifications, transferable skills and a positive attitude towards employment. Therefore, there are clear incentives to support the public sector with the provision of well-resourced and good quality physical activity opportunities in school and education settings.

Workplace initiatives that promote modes of active travel to and from work are significant as not only will active travel improve employee health, but it is also likely that this will save employees money and reduce the impact of motorized forms of transport on the environment. There are also a whole range of options that an employer can consider including staff clubs at lunchtime, on-site group exercise classes, encouraging walking meetings and standing desks.

There is a significant risk that without action, and the private sector not playing its part, that participation levels in physical activity by young people do not change and the next generation become a burden on society and on employers due to the negative impact of an unhealthy population.

Case example: Speedo Swim United

The Speedo Swim United project is a transformative initiative in the UK aimed at ensuring all children can swim 25 meters and self-rescue by the time they leave primary school in 2025. In response to alarming statistics, including projections that 60% of children may leave school unable to swim by 2026 and that 95% of Black adults and 80% of Black children in England do not swim, the initiative focuses on addressing disparities in swimming education. Targeting disadvantaged



and ethnically diverse communities, Swim United tackles socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers through innovative solutions such as pop-up pools and accessible swim lessons. With the support of Swim England, media partnerships, political engagement, and Olympic athletes, the project raises awareness, inspires participation, and advocates for long-term systemic change to ensure equitable access to swimming for all.

Benefits for education, skills and employability takeaways

- Physical activity and sport can deliver significant benefits for children at school, young adults in further education and adults seeking employment by helping develop vital skills including self-confidence, motivation, leadership, persistence and resilience.
- In the education system, physical activity contributes positively to outcomes including attendance and attainment across various subjects, one study showing an increase in test scores by 40%.
- A US Study also shows those who take regular exercise earned salaries between 6% and 10% higher than those with more sedentary lifestyles.

Key conclusions, policy recommendations and guidance for policy makers

Conclusions

This paper has outlined the transversal benefits of physical activity across a range of areas and drawn-out key evidence to demonstrate that physical activity can be a low-cost, high-impact intervention that supports and protects our people, our planet, our workforce, our economies and our young people in education.

The costs of treating poor health and in particular, conditions that are largely preventable if the world was more physically active, is wholly unacceptable and more urgent action must be taken to make it easier for people to lead more active lives. Government and public-sector policy makers have a critical role to play to identify and utilize innovative and cross-sector solutions to this problem and ensure associated policies are implementable and measurable. Physical activity should be higher on the agendas of government and more collaboration is needed between ministries of health, sport, youth, education, gender and finance and with other sectors to find innovative cross-sectoral solutions to address decreasing physical activity levels.

Policy recommendations, available guidance and tools to support society to be more physically active

Governments and other policy makers wishing to utilize physical activity to reap benefits across health, environment, workforce, economy, education, skills and employability, can find in Appendix A, a list of guidance, tools and other resources.

A key guidance resource, endorsed by Governments globally is WHO's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030 (GAPPA

- More Active People for a Healthier World)⁴⁶ which provides a robust framework of effective and feasible policy actions to increase physical activity. The action plan should be a central reference for all policy makers and other organizations exploring how they can support global efforts in a whole of society response. It has a clear target of a 15% relative reduction in the global prevalence of physical inactivity in adults and in adolescents by 2030. The framework covers policy actions across 4 objectives: active societies, active environments, active people and active systems. The plan calls for cross-government and multisectoral partnerships, as well meaningful community engagement to ensure a coordinated, whole-of-system response to tackle the challenge of physical inactivity.

Business at OECD (BIAC) supports the objectives of the GAPPA (WHO Global Action Plan on Physical Activity):

Active transport

Modern transport systems play a crucial role in connectivity and economic development but can also pose challenges to public health such as air pollution and reduced physical activity. Governments can achieve a ‘win-win-win’ through reshaping transport mobility with a focus on physical activity, health and equity that can both reduce health risks while increasing access to convenient, affordable transport and protecting the climate.



Healthy, active workforce

We support OECD’s work on integrated approach of the promotion of health and well-being into occupational safety and health actions⁴⁷. Without a healthy workforce or a healthy society, an economy’s competitiveness will be significantly undermined and will be more vulnerable to shocks associated with potential future pandemics and climate change. For example, policymakers should consider implementing financial incentives to promote physical activity, such as tax credits for fitness facility memberships, subsidies for purchasing bicycles, and support for acquiring running apparel and footwear. These initiatives can lower barriers to participation in structured exercise, encourage healthier lifestyles, and drive long-term economic competitiveness and sustainability by reducing healthcare costs associated with physical inactivity.



Young people as a priority target audience

There is consistent and compelling evidence that embedding a physical activity habit in children and young people can help prevent poor health outcomes as adult. Additionally, physical activity and sport can deliver significant benefits for young people’s employment and economic prospects. Governments can take action to prioritize the delivery of Quality Physical Education from primary school age through to further education to ensure that young people develop physical literacy skills and a positive attitude and relationship with physical activity and sport that shapes their behavior into adulthood. It also cannot be underestimated how important it is to tackle the astonishingly high levels of physical inactivity amongst young people and adolescents which currently stands at 81%. If the younger generation can be effectively influenced to develop more positive well-being habits, including physical activity, there will be a robust foundation of good health underpinning society, its future workforce which enable greater competitiveness and stronger economies.



The private sector, as outlined in this report, can play a significant role to influence young people and their families as consumers to be more physically active although consumer action alone cannot bring about improved health and wellness for all. Not everyone has the resources, motivation, knowledge, or enabling environment to do so. Public policy, fiscal incentives and intersectoral collaboration are essential to fill these gaps. Public health policy should focus on increasing the number of healthy people through prevention approaches e.g. physical activity, health-literacy, regular health checkups, immunization and others, along with reducing the number of unhealthy people through early diagnosis and treatment, and streamlined care services.

It is also important to ensure that public policies are robust, up to date and are coherent across a range of thematic areas, such as the ones presented in this report. Key policy challenges that businesses face when promoting people’s engagement in physical activities can include inefficient regulation, out-of-date systems, and lack of coherence among different policies which can hamper progress and engagement in this potentially very product cross-sector approach.

Appendix A:

Useful policy tools, resources and further reading

Area	Organization	Resource	Links
Health	WHO	More Active People for a Healthier World – A Global Action plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030	https://www.who.int/initiatives/gappa
		Global Levels of Physical Activity in adults – off track for 2030	https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240096905
		Guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behavior	https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240015128
		Global Status Report on Physical Activity 2022	https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240059153
	Business at OECD (BIAC)	Health as a key for economic resilience	https://25159535.fs1.hubspotusercontent-eu1.net/hubfs/25159535/website/documents/pdf/Health/2023-FIN%20Business%20at%20OECD%20(BIAC)%20Health%20Forum%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf
Environment	UN	Sport for Climate Action Framework	https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Sports_for_Climate_Action_Declaration_and_Framework.pdf
Workforce	World Economic Forum & McKinsey Health Institute	Working Nine to Thrive & A Feel Good Story for the Economy	https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/sustainable-inclusive-growth/charts/a-feel-good-story-for-the-economy
Education, skills and employability	UNESCO	Quality Physical Education	https://www.unesco.org/en/quality-physical-education

Appendix A:

Useful policy tools, resources and further reading

Area	Organization	Resource	Links
Social impact and value of sport	UNESCO	The Social Impact of Sport – Unlocking the Potential of Sport to drive Social Transformations	https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000390603
Healthy life-styles	OECD (2022)	Healthy Eating and Active Lifestyles: Best Practices in Public Health	https://doi.org/10.1787/40f65568-en
Well-being at work	OECD (2022)	Promoting Health and Well-being at Work: Policy and Practices	https://doi.org/10.1787/e179b2a5-en
Health in times of crisis	OECD (2024)	How's Life? 2024: Well-being and Resilience in Times of Crisis	https://doi.org/10.1787/90ba854a-en
	Japan	KENKO Investment for Health (KIH)	https://kenko-keiei.jp/en/ *Ranking of 2466 companies (including 783 listed companies) in Japanese https://kenko-keiei.jp/wp-content/themes/kenko_keiei/cms/files/result2024.xlsx
	Life Insurance Association Japan (LIAJ)	Physical Activity Guidelines for Health Promotion	https://www.seiho.or.jp/activity/health/leaflet/pdf/01.pdf *Japanese

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Business at OECD (BIAC)
13/15, Chaussée de la Muette, Paris 75016
Tel: +33 (0) 1 42 30 09 60
www.businessatoecd.org



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