

CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL ACTIVITY DROPS FROM AGE 9 TO 15, NIH STUDY INDICATES

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CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL ACTIVITY DROPS FROM AGE 9 TO 15, NIH STUDY INDICATES By 15, Most Fail
To Reach Recommended Activity Level

The activity level of a large group of American children dropped sharply between age 9 and age 15, when most failed to reach the daily recommended activity level, according to the latest findings from a long-term study by the National Institutes of Health.

The analysis is one of the largest, most comprehensive of its kind to date.

The researchers evaluated the children to determine whether they achieved the minimum 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) recommended for children.

At age 9, the children averaged roughly three hours of MVPA on weekdays and weekends. By age 15, however, they averaged only 40 minutes per weekday, and 35 minutes per weekend.

"Lack of physical activity in childhood raises the risk for obesity and its attendant health problems later in life," said Duane Alexander, M.D., Director of NIH's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).
"Helping American children maintain appropriate activity levels is a major public health goal requiring immediate action."

The analysis was conducted on data collected for the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, a long term study of more than 1,000 children from ethnically and economically diverse backgrounds. The study collected information on various other aspects of children's health and development. It was geared toward gathering information on children's experience in various child care arrangements but did not constitute a nationally representative sample of the United States as a whole.

The analysis, appearing in the July 16 "Journal of the American Medical Association," was undertaken by Philip Nader, M.D., Emeritus Professor of Pediatrics at the University of California San Diego, and other coauthors from the study.

Beginning at age 9, the researchers recorded the activity levels of more than 800 children for four to seven days. The children's activity was recorded with an accelerometer, a device that records movement, which the children wore on a belt. The researchers conducted follow up tracking at ages 11, 12, and 15.

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that children and adolescents engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week.
(See
<<http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/default.htm>>.)

As examples of moderate physical activity, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention list walking briskly, dancing, swimming, or bicycling on level terrain. Vigorous physical activity includes such activities as jogging, high-impact aerobic dancing, swimming continuous laps, or bicycling uphill. Additional information is available at
<<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/everyone/recommendations/children.htm>>

The researchers found that, at ages 9 and 11, more than 90 percent of the children met the recommended level of 60 minutes or more of MVPA each day. By age 15, however, only 31 percent met the recommended level on weekdays, and 17 percent met the recommended level on weekends. The researchers estimated that physical activity declined by about 40

minutes per day each year until, by age 15, most failed to reach the daily recommended activity level. On average, boys were more active than girls, spending 18 more minutes per weekday in MVPA than did girls, and 13 more minutes per day in MVPA on weekends. The researchers estimated the age at which girls dropped below the recommended level of 60 minutes of MVPA as 13.1 years for weekdays, compared to boys, who dropped below the recommended level at 14.7 years. For weekends, girls dropped below the recommended level at 12.6 years, and boys at 13.4 years.

"This decline augurs poorly for levels of physical activity in American adults and potentially for health over the life-course," the study authors wrote. "Consequently, there is need for program and policy action as early as possible at the family, community, school, health care, and governmental levels to address the problem of decreasing physical activity with increasing age."

Dr. Nader explained that local school systems have a role to play, by ensuring children receive periodic recess breaks and daily active physical education. He added that local governments also could strive to provide safe biking and walking routes around schools.

"But parents don't need to wait for big changes" Dr. Nader said. "Whenever possible, parents could encourage family walks with their children. Even walking for as few as 15 minutes a day would provide health benefits. On weekends, family outings could be centered on longer walks or biking."

Increasing physical activity is a primary goal of We Can! (Ways to Enhance Children's Activity and Nutrition), a science-based national education program from the National Institutes of Health to help children ages 8-13 maintain a healthy weight. We Can! provides tips, evidence-based curricula and other resources for parents and community programs to help children and their families make better food choices, increase physical activity, and reduce recreational screen time. More information is available at <http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov> or toll-free at 866-35-WE CAN (866-359-3226).

The NICHD sponsors research on development, before and after birth; maternal, child, and family health; reproductive biology and population issues; and medical rehabilitation. For more information, visit the Institute's Web site at <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/>.

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