

Chapter 3. The President's Recommendations for Improving Physical Fitness

Be Physically Active Every Day

Background

Fitness problems such as obesity and overweight have reached truly epidemic proportions in the United States. In the last 20 years, obesity rates have increased by more than 60 percent among adults. In 1999, 61 percent of the adult population was either overweight or obese. The obesity epidemic impacts other diseases as well. For example, the incidence of type 2 diabetes, a major consequence of obesity, is on the rise. Among U.S. adults, diagnosed diabetes increased 49 percent from 1990 to 2000.

The rate of increase in overweight among young people has been even steeper. This is particularly troubling since many of the behaviors that lead to adult obesity are established during childhood. Just 10 years ago, type 2 diabetes was virtually unknown in children and adolescents. Indeed, the medical community commonly referred to the condition as “adult onset diabetes.” Today, it accounts for almost 50 percent of new cases of pediatric diabetes in some communities. Medical complications associated with obesity in children can lead to hospitalizations for type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, and asthma. Since 1980, the percentage of children who are overweight has nearly doubled, and the percentage of adolescents who are overweight has nearly tripled. About 8 million young Americans, almost 15 percent of all children, are overweight.

Americans young and old should incorporate regular physical activity into their everyday lives. This does not necessarily mean joining an expensive gym or committing to a rigorous exercise or training routine. It is sufficient to choose activities that fit into your daily routine that speed your heart rate and breathing, or increase your strength and flexibility. Examples include walking to work, gardening, taking extra stairs, or mowing the lawn with a push mower. Besides building strength and aerobic fitness, regular exercise relieves stress, provides motivation, promotes relaxation, and facilitates sleep. Such activity reduces the risk of dying of coronary heart disease and decreases the risk for colon cancer, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

Regular physical activity is important throughout life. Healthy lifestyles are more influential than genetic factors in avoiding deterioration traditionally associated with aging. The growing number of older Americans places increasing demands on the public health system and on medical and social services. Currently, almost one-third of total U.S. health care expenditures are for older adults. These expenditures are largely due to treatment and care of chronic diseases, and the cost associated with many of these conditions could be reduced through regular physical activity.

For children, almost any physical activity is sufficient as long as they are moving. Playing actively or participating in athletic or physical fitness activities during school, running, biking, jumping rope, and dancing -- instead of watching television or playing video games -- all provide children with the kinds of activity they need.

The President's Challenge:

Regular physical activity substantially reduces the risk of poor health. Physical activity need not be strenuous or very time-consuming to be beneficial, and all ages can benefit from modest physical activity. Every little bit of effort counts:

- ***Adults, get at least 30 minutes of physical activity each day.*** If it is too hard to set aside 30 minutes at one time, break it up into 10 or 15 minute segments. Developed by a panel of scientists under the leadership of Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as a part of the *2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, these recommendations for daily activity are based on the results of studies that examined the relationship between physical activity and health. If only 10 percent of American adults began regularly walking, \$5.6 billion in health care costs associated with heart disease could be saved.
- ***Children and teenagers, get at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day.*** For children, setting aside time for physical activity should be easy. Unfortunately, even children have busy schedules today. According the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, they can break activity up into segments. Regular activity for children is important. Normal childhood play or outdoor activity helps control blood pressure and manages weight while building and maintaining healthy bones, muscles, and joints.
- ***Parents, commit to family activities that involve physical activity.*** It can be easier to work physical activity into your daily routine if you combine it with family time.

Promoting Physical Fitness: Administration Actions

Fee-Free Weekend in America's Federal Lands--Free admission has been granted to many of America's Federally managed areas this weekend, June 22 and 23, 2002. In support of physical fitness, Americans are encouraged to visit one of the 385 National Parks or numerous other Federal recreation areas throughout the country. Public Service Announcements have been running nationwide to alert Americans of the effort. Eliminating entrance fees and increasing accessibility will allow more Americans to benefit from our public lands.

HealthierUS.gov Web Site--This interactive web site will be the central repository of information related to the President's initiative and will serve as a portal to resources throughout the Federal government related to promoting fitness. This site will provide links to www.fitness.gov, the web site of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports; www.BAM.gov, an interactive site encouraging increased physical activities for adolescents; healthfinder.gov, an exhaustive source of information on health care topics prepared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); and many other fitness, nutrition, prevention, and safety sites from across the Federal agencies.

Promoting Use of Public Lands and Waters--A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been entered into by the Departments of Interior (DOI), USDA, HHS, and the Army Corps of Engineers to promote the use of public lands to enhance physical and physiological health. The cooperating agencies will collaborate to raise public awareness of the role and benefits of physical activity in maintaining good physical and mental health. They will raise public awareness of the many places in America's public lands where recreation opportunities exist. Programs will be developed with a focus on preventing or reducing obesity, and encouraging a physically active lifestyle. Where appropriate these collaborative projects will focus on the needs of urban and underserved populations, especially those living near public lands and waters. Volunteer events such as National Public Lands Day, National Fishing and Boating Week, National Trails Day, and Great Outdoors Week shall be promoted as benefiting people through activity in natural and cultural landscapes.

Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance--Also known as Rivers & Trails or RTCA, this program works with community groups and local and State governments to conserve rivers, preserve open space, and develop trails and greenways as "pathways to health." The National Park Service (NPS) administers the technical assistance with support from HHS and USDA and other federal and nonprofit partners. RTCA has worked with communities on urban promenades, trails along abandoned railroad rights-of-way, wildlife corridors, downtown riverfronts, and regional water trails.