

**Obesity remains one of the biggest health burdens faced globally, resulting in a dramatic increase in physical, mental, and social complications. Physical activity can present itself as an effective treatment option before medication and other interventions are considered. Explore the benefits of physical activity and outline current government strategies implemented to promote this to the public.**

### **Abstract**

Increase in weight gain to unhealthy levels have been increasing dramatically over recent years. A sedentary lifestyle accompanied with a major rise in processed foods have become major contributors worsening the public's outcome. Physical activity and its effective use can sprout major positive changes in an individual's life which is a heavily supported notion in the healthcare industry. These benefits spring forth improvements in physical, mental, and social aspects of life which can hold numerous benefits with regards to any conditions or hardships someone might suffer from. Advancements in technology and fast-food chains within any given community promotes a reduction in physical activity due to the ease of travel and access to low quality foods. To combat this, the governing body of a country must develop adequate strategies to incentivize access and availability whilst reducing costs to attract low-income households. This essay aims to cover all the important aspects that benefit from regular exercise and will promote examples of initiatives put into place to increase rates of physical activity amongst the population.

The increase in fast food chains as well as processed foods has led to obesity becoming an epidemic across the UK. This detrimental issue becomes pronounced when considering the 11,117 hospital admissions in 2020, a 4% increase when compared to the admissions in 2017 [1]. According to the NHS, 67% of men and 60% of women were found to be overweight or obese in 2020. Looking at this crisis, physical activity (PA) offers a solution in reducing the risk of obesity. Despite being regarded and agreed upon amongst medical professionals as a “miracle cure”, PA is seen to decrease in older age groups. Performing PA regularly is shown to reduce risk from major diseases, such as a stroke by up to 50% [2]. The decline in PA raises extreme importance regarding PA health promotion across the country. In light of this, this essay will look into the health benefits of PA and will review issues causing the decline of physical activity amongst the public. It is also important to consider the psychological and social benefits that arise from doing PA regularly. Furthermore, I will look into current PA health promotion strategies implemented and their effectiveness across the UK.

It is important to start considering the benefits PA has on a person’s health, such as having the ability to drastically reduce the risk of numerous cardiovascular related illnesses, up to 35% [2]. This reinforces the notion of PA being presented as a possible solution to reduce the risk of premature death which can be attributable to any of these diseases. The NHS supports this claim by stating the risk of early death is lowered by up to 30% when the individual regularly performs PA. When concerning weight gain and obesity, PA has an effective role in preventing and managing this issue. A study found an expenditure of 1500 to 2000 calories during a week of PA resulted in a maintained weight loss [3]. The author stressed the importance of a healthy, balanced diet alongside PA to be the most effective intervention for weight loss. A survey published by the Public Health of England (PHE) shows an excess intake of sugar across all age groups with a minimum increase of 6% above the recommended sugar intake value. This trend is identical when regarding saturated fat consumption as well [4]. A major advantage when it comes to PA is that it can be as simple as substituting public transport and vehicles for regular walks or cycling. This unfortunately portrays one of the main issues faced in today’s society; advancements in technology that

has incentivized a more sedentary lifestyle, due to its convenience and ease [2]. To tackle this issue, we must carefully inform the public the consequences of living a sedentary lifestyle whilst ensuring no judgement or malice is accompanying it.

The advancement of technology is one of many factors that led to the slow decline in PA. According to the NHS, 30% of adults were sedentary in 2012 for at least 6 hours per day during the week [5]. The NHS estimates 11.6% of deaths from this group were linked with a sedentary lifestyle, costing the NHS millions because of related illnesses requiring treatment, such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Unfortunately, as much as 81% of UK workers spend between 4-9 hours sitting at their desk, and after they finish work, they would often use public transportation to return home [6]. This eliminates any availability to utilize PA during the day, which supports the claim of PA decreasing in higher age groups as previously mentioned. Other common examples of domestic sedentary behaviour include watching TV or using a computer. These following reasons contribute towards an individual's sedentary lifestyle, negatively impacting them physically, and mentally. This is why it is imperative to look at the psychological benefits that come from PA and how this can play an important role in aiding multiple mental conditions.

Health benefits of PA have been studied extensively but the psychosocial benefits of PA are less clear, despite being of equal importance. As a result, this study aimed to address this issue, along with the role of PA in this particular aspect [7]. Whilst studies concerning depression among children were said to be speculative, this study showed PA helped older teenagers manage their depressive symptoms, which presents a more effective solution when compared to pharmacological interventions such as antidepressant medication [8]. Performing PA, especially with a regular routine was suggested to boost a person's self-esteem; this becomes apparent when factoring specific goals set by individuals, and achieving them through hard work and consistency, resulting in an improved self-esteem and outlook. Furthermore, PA is seen as an effective anti-anxiety treatment as studies support the claims of exercise being associated with reductions in anxiety [9]. These benefits often interlink during PA and heavily contribute towards a more positive state of

mind and a healthier body for the individual. PA has been shown to yield various physical, mental and emotional advantages. Taking into account what has been mentioned, it is essential to introduce the positive impacts that PA brings upon social factors, leading to an improvement in numerous aspects of a person's public life.

When looking into the benefits of PA holistically, the social benefits as well as social implications must be addressed with the same importance, as social implications can play a significant role in physical inactivity. According to an article that reviews a study into the social benefits of PA among students; the results found a positive link between PA and academic performance amongst the participants [10]. This finding amplifies the sense of PA enhancing cognitive functions, which can translate onto adulthood in positively impacting their employment opportunities [4]. Further research found an increase in leadership skills and empathy when PA through team sports and group classes is involved [11]. It can be suggested that communication skills are also improved upon using these PA methods, where providing thoughts and commands to teammates can result in an improved understanding and synergy as a result. These improvements are invaluable to medical professionals, where working in a team cohesively and communicating effectively influences the overall outcome in a surgery. Communication skills can also be an important quality when regarding patient-doctor relationships, as it is imperative to be able to extract the necessary information from the patient in a calm, confident and concise manner. Not only can this make the patient more comfortable; this can also improve the relationship between a patient and their doctor overtime, which is considered amongst many medical professionals to be a vital relationship to uphold under any circumstance. Despite the promising social benefits that come from PA, numerous social factors can play a role in decreasing the likelihood of the general public exercising. These factors must be considered when mentioning government initiatives placed to help tackle physical inactivity.

To be able to effectively decide on a health promotion strategy, the UK government must factor in the social determinants of health across the country. These factors can include: economic status, social and community context, and the neighbourhoods the public live in

[12]. The following factors do not only impact the degree in physical inactivity, but also limits the available health promotion strategies. This is evident in a study that found a significant association between larger social networks and an increase in PA [13]. This reinforces the idea that exercising in groups, rather than individually can promote PA. Economic status can often act as a barrier, especially in low income households as they might not be able to afford access to facilities such as gyms. To effectively tackle this issue, the government must consider strategies that provide incentives to exercising, and provide a more affordable and ease of access to these facilities that promote PA. The UK government attempted this by introducing Change4Life 'Train like a Jedi', which incentivises children to exercise through the use of fun activities involving their favourite fictional heroes [14]. Furthermore, other techniques such as tax exemptions were introduced, like the Cycle to Work initiative allowing you to loan bicycles and safety gear to employees as a tax-free benefit [15]. This encourages more workers to stray away from public transportation and include a form of PA in their daily lifestyle which is shown to improve workplace health and employee motivation as indicated by the UK government.

To conclude, the importance of promoting PA becomes obvious when it is shown to decline over the years. To avoid numerous preventable diseases and improve the overall quality of an individual's life, the government must impose additional strategies to educate the public and increase awareness on the importance of exercise. This can complement other strategies that make it easier and more financially attractive to access certain facilities and areas for exercise. Moving forward, PA presents a feasible option to help save costs on treating preventable diseases, allowing the redistribution of funding to where it is required.

## **Bibliography:**

- [1] NHS Choices, NHS, 2020, [digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet/england-2020](https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet/england-2020).
- [2] NHS Choices, NHS, 2018, [www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-health-benefits/](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-health-benefits/).
- [3] Rippe, James M, and Stacey Hess. "The Role of Physical Activity in the Prevention and Management of Obesity." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, vol. 98, no. 10, 1998, doi:10.1016/s0002-8223(98)00708-1.
- [4] Public Health. "NDNS: Results from Years 7 and 8 (Combined)." GOV.UK, GOV.UK, 11 Apr. 2018, [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ndns-results-from-years-7-and-8-combined](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ndns-results-from-years-7-and-8-combined).
- [5] NHS Choices, NHS, 2019, [www.nhs.uk/news/lifestyle-and-exercise/does-prolonged-sitting-really-kill-70000-people-year-uk/](https://www.nhs.uk/news/lifestyle-and-exercise/does-prolonged-sitting-really-kill-70000-people-year-uk/)
- [6] Bean, Sara. "Majority of UK Workers Sit at Their Desk between Four and Nine Hours a Day." *Workplace Insight*, 18 Oct. 2018, [workplaceinsight.net/uk-office-workers-may-sit-at-their-desk-for-up-to-nine-hours-a-day/](https://workplaceinsight.net/uk-office-workers-may-sit-at-their-desk-for-up-to-nine-hours-a-day/).

- [7] P; N. Psychosocial aspects of physical activity [Internet]. U.S. National Library of Medicine; [cited 2023 Jul 27]. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20046307/>
- [8] Rape, Roger N. "Running and Depression." *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, vol. 64, no. 3\_suppl, 1987, pp. 1303–1310., doi:10.2466/pms.1987.64.3c.1303.
- [9] Petruzzello, Steven J., et al. "A Meta-Analysis on the Anxiety-Reducing Effects of Acute and Chronic Exercise." *Sports Medicine*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1991, pp. 143–182., doi:10.2165/00007256-1991111030-00002.
- [10] "Exercise Can Boost Teens' Academic Performance." *Medical News Today*, MediLexicon International, 2013, [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/267677](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/267677).
- [11] Nauert, Rick. "Physical Activity Helps Improve Social Skills." *Psych Central*, 15 June 2019, [psychcentral.com/news/2018/03/15/physical-activity-helps-improve-social-skills/12120.html](http://psychcentral.com/news/2018/03/15/physical-activity-helps-improve-social-skills/12120.html).
- [12] "Social Determinants of Health." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, 15 Nov. 2019, [www.who.int/social\\_determinants/en/](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/).
- [13] Shelton, Rachel C., et al. "The Association Between Social Factors and Physical Activity Among Low-Income Adults Living in Public Housing." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 101, no. 11, 2011, pp. 2102–2110., doi:10.2105/ajph.2010.196030.
- [14] NHS Choices, NHS, [www.nhs.uk/change4life/activities](http://www.nhs.uk/change4life/activities).

- [15] "Fitness at Work." GOV.UK, 2018, [www.gov.uk/guidance/fitness-at-work](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/fitness-at-work).