

MEASURING LEVELS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TO MONITOR HEALTH BENEFITS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION

The measurement of participation in sport and physical activity in the UK has been driven by factors such as monitoring the investment in local authority facilities, evaluating the difference National Lottery funding has made, and monitoring service level agreements between Government and national agencies. A new agenda has arisen which is to monitor the amount of physical activity people are undertaking in order to derive a health benefit as a link between physical activity and health has been firmly established. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of premature mortality, coronary heart disease, colon cancer, diabetes mellitus and osteoporosis and helps reduce depression and anxiety, improve mood and enhance a person's ability to perform daily tasks (US Department for Health and Human Services, 1996; Department of Health, 2004).

This new agenda requires new research and much more sophisticated research instruments than currently exist. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the evidence and then to design and test a new survey instrument designed to assess levels of adult participation in sport and physical activity in Northern Ireland.

METHODS

This large-scale population based survey was commissioned by Sport NI and conducted by Ipsos MORI, Belfast. The sample universe comprises all individuals aged 16+ living in Northern Ireland. A total of 4,653 interviews were conducted continuously over a 12 month period (23 July - 10 August 2010). The survey was conducted face-to-face, in-home, using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). A stratified random sampling approach was applied for the selection of households. The data were weighted to reflect the age and sex profile of the Northern Ireland population and the geographical distribution across 26 district councils. The main aim of the survey is to enhance the understanding of sport and physical activity patterns and determinants across the adult population of Northern Ireland.

RESULTS

The key preliminary headline findings from the survey are detailed below. 35% of respondents achieve the Chief Medical Officer's recommended level of physical activity. Most physical activity is done at home, followed by activities at work.

The most important physical activities in the work domain are manual labour and walking about while at work. The work domain as a source of physical activity is especially relevant for men and people from lower social classes. The main physical activities in the home relate to housework, DIY and gardening. The contribution of the home domain to overall levels of physical activity is especially relevant for women and older people.

The strongest influencing factor on people's physical activity is age.

There are no major differences regarding overall physical activity levels between social classes or by deprivation. Physical activity is related to a health body mass index (BMI) and healthy eating behaviour.

37% of Northern Ireland's adult population participated in at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity sport in the last seven days. The figure increases to 47% when walking and cycling for recreation are included.

The most popular sports are walking, fitness club activities, swimming and jogging.

Sport participation of women, older people and the unemployed is lower than average, both in terms of the participation and the time spent on sport activities. In addition, those with lower educational attainment and those of lower social classes are less likely to participate. When prompted with a range of reasons for participating in sport, enjoyment and keeping fit were most frequently mentioned by the respondents. Women are generally more motivated by losing weight, while for men the performance and competitive aspects are much more important. Relieving stress is an important motivation for people that work, especially for those with higher qualifications.

DISCUSSION

In today's society, changing inactive lifestyles and increasing levels of activity presents a tremendous public health challenge - a challenge that cannot be ignored if health is to be improved. Physical activity needs to be seen as an opportunity - for enjoyment, for improved vitality, for a sense of achievement, for fitness, for optimal weight, and -not least- for health. It is in this context that this research is relevant and necessary. Government, relevant agencies, communities and individuals in Northern Ireland need to become aware of current levels of activity and then reflect on how conducive homes, neighbourhoods and environments are to supporting more active living.

References:

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