Walking: A ‘Best Buy’ for Promoting Personal and Public Health

Key Messages

※ Walking is an inexpensive and all-round mode of aerobic physical activity that can be done just about anytime and anywhere. For most of the adult population, walking cadence of 100 steps per minute is sufficient to reach moderate intensity.

※ The Population Health Survey 2014/15 showed that 87.0% of non-institutionalised persons aged 18 and above had sufficient physical activity and active travel by walking or cycling contributing considerably (56.4%) to the overall physical activity levels. Overall, about three out of four (74.0%) persons reported walking or riding a bicycle for at least 30 minutes to get to and from places per day.

※ The 2016 Hong Kong Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth reported that 80% of the boys and 77% of the girls travelled to school on foot or by bicycle at least once per week. However, less than half of the children and youth met the international recommendation of doing at least 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily.

※ The Hong Kong Government has long been working closely with various stakeholders in promoting physical activity participation. In May 2018, the Government launched “Towards 2025: Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases in Hong Kong (SAP) with 9 local NCD targets to be achieved by 2025, including Target 3: A 10% relative reduction in the prevalence of insufficient physical activity among adolescents and adults.

※ To enable people to travel on foot and walk more, the Government will continue to promote ‘Fitness Walking’, intensify the concept of walkability in urban planning and foster a pedestrian-friendly environment. Members of the public are encouraged to walk more whenever possible.
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Insufficient physical activity is a major risk factor for ill health and premature death. Compared to people who are sufficiently active, those who are insufficiently active would have 20% to 30% increased risk of death. Despite the negative health effect of physical inactivity is well-known, about one in four adults and four out of five adolescents globally are not physically active enough.\(^1\) Physical activity is defined as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure — including activities undertaken when travelling, working, playing, carrying out household chores and engaging in recreational pursuits. For optimal health, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends adults in general to do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity, or equivalent amount throughout the week.\(^1\) Children and adolescents aged 5−17 years should do at least 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily.\(^1\) Regarding preschool children, the Department of Health (DH) of Hong Kong Government recommends that they should accumulate at least 180 minutes of different types and intensity levels of physical activity everyday.\(^2\)

**Health Benefits of a Daily Walk**

While any type of physical activity would offer health benefits, walking is an inexpensive and all-round mode of aerobic activity that can be done just about anytime and anywhere. Beyond a pair of comfortable shoes, walking does not require gym membership, the purchase of expensive equipment or specialised attire. Compared to scheduled exercise classes or activities, walking can easily be incorporated into everyday life and offer more flexibility for busy individuals. As a self-regulated and low-impact activity, walking is inherently safe for people of all ages and fitness levels. For those who are not used to be active, it is an easy, workable start-up. Walking is also an effective form of exercise for weight control and removing excess body fat for many people. Regular walking can strengthen bones, boost muscle power and endurance, thereby helps reducing the risk of osteoporosis and falls. Epidemiological studies show that having a sufficient ‘daily dose’ of walking can reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that include cardiovascular diseases (such as hypertension, heart disease and stroke), type 2 diabetes, some cancers (such as colon cancer and breast cancer) and depression.\(^3,4\) Furthermore, research shows that walking can improve memory,\(^5\) enhance creative thinking (especially walking outdoors),\(^6\) protect against deterioration of brain function and reduce the risk of cognitive impairment in late adulthood.\(^7\)

While every bit of walking helps get fit, more health benefits could be obtained from a brisk walk than a stroll. A pooled analysis of over 50 000 walkers found that walking at a brisk pace was associated with 24% and 21% reduced risk of all-cause mortality and cardiovascular mortality compared with walking at a slow pace respectively.\(^8\) In fact, brisk walking is a moderate-intensity physical activity. According to the Compendium of Physical Activity (code 17170), brisk walking involves a pace of 2.5 miles (or 4.0 kilometres) per hour with a metabolic equivalent (MET) value of 3 (meaning that it uses about 3 times as much energy as sitting at rest).\(^9\) Although there are some variations among people in the precise walking cadence (steps per minute) needed to achieve brisk walking, a systematic review reports that 100 steps per minute is sufficient to reach moderate intensity for most of the adult population,\(^10,11\) which is a level associated with health benefits.
Local Situation

The Population Health Survey 2014/15 of DH used the Global Physical Activity Questionnaire to collect information on population’s physical activity participation in three settings, including activities at work, travel to and from places, and recreational activities for at least 10 minutes continuously. Results showed that 87.0% of non-institutionalised persons aged 18 and above had sufficient physical activity (i.e. meeting the WHO recommendation) and active travel (by walking or cycling) contributed 56.4% to the total physical activity levels. Overall, about three out of four (74.0%) reported walking or riding a bicycle for at least 30 minutes to get to and from places per day (Table 1). Using a specific grading framework, the 2016 Hong Kong Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth showed that ‘active transport’ was regarded good (B grade), with 80% of the boys and 77% of the girls travelling to school on foot or by bicycle at least once per week. However, the ‘overall physical activity level’ remained poor (D Grade) as less than half of the children and youth met the recommendation of doing at least 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity daily.13

Table 1: Proportion of persons aged 18 and above reported walking or riding a bicycle to get to and from places by average time spent per day, gender and age group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Less than 10 minutes</th>
<th>10–29 minutes</th>
<th>30 minutes or above</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>73.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
<td>Less than 10 minutes</td>
<td>10–29 minutes</td>
<td>30 minutes or above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>76.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–74</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 and above</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>66.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The daily average minutes per day spent on walking or riding a bicycle for travelling was computed by multiplying the number of day(s) in a typical week the respondents spent on walking or riding a bicycle for travelling and the average minutes of time spent on those days and then divided by 7 days.
Source: Population Health Survey 2014/15.
Reduce Physical Inactivity

Reducing population’s level of physical inactivity has been identified as a priority action by the WHO for the prevention and control of NCDs. In June 2018, WHO launched “Global Action Plan on Physical Activity: More Active People for a Healthier World” and set out a challenging but vital global target of achieving 15% relative reduction in the global prevalence of physical inactivity in adults and in adolescents by 2030.14 The Hong Kong Government has long been working closely with various stakeholders in promoting physical activity participation. In May 2018, the Government launched “Towards 2025: Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases in Hong Kong (SAP) with a list of committed actions and 9 local NCD targets to be achieved by 2025, including Target 3: A 10% relative reduction in the prevalence of insufficient physical activity among adolescents and adults (Box 1).15

In Hong Kong, the hectic modern lifestyle very often encourages people to be sedentary or deprives their chance to participate in exercises or sports. As walking is one of the easiest forms of physical activity to incorporate into everyday life, promotion of walking is a practical and sustainable strategy to increase population’s level of physical activity. Increasing levels of walking, in place of taking the car or other forms of motorised transport, can also benefit the environment with reduced greenhouse gas emission and air pollution. In view of walking being a best buy for promoting public and planetary health,16 the Hong Kong Government will continue to promote ‘Fitness Walking’ (i.e. walking exercise with correct posture and in proper amount), intensify the concept of walkability in urban planning and foster a pedestrian-friendly environment as to enable people to travel on foot and walk more.15

Box 1: 9 local NCD targets by 2025

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target 1</th>
<th>Target 2</th>
<th>Target 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 25% relative reduction in risk of premature mortality from cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes, or chronic respiratory diseases</td>
<td>At least 10% relative reduction in the prevalence of binge drinking and harmful use of alcohol (harmful drinking/alcohol dependence) among adults and in the prevalence of drinking among youth</td>
<td>A 10% relative reduction in the prevalence of insufficient physical activity among adolescents and adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target 4</td>
<td>Target 5</td>
<td>Target 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 30% relative reduction in mean population daily intake of salt/sodium</td>
<td>A 30% relative reduction in the prevalence of current tobacco use in persons aged 15+ years</td>
<td>Contain the prevalence of raised blood pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target 7</td>
<td>Target 8</td>
<td>Target 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halt the rise in diabetes and obesity</td>
<td>Prevent heart attacks and strokes through drug therapy and counselling</td>
<td>Improve availability of affordable basic technologies and essential medicines to treat major NCD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Walking is man’s best medicine”, as Hippocrates (a Greek Physician) stated 2 400 years ago. In 2005, the Government developed an Exercise Prescription Manual, in collaboration with medical and relevant professionals, putting exercise in the forefront of the care plan designed for patients, healthy people and elderly. Walking is one of the commonly prescribed types of physical activity to enhance tolerance and promote health.

People in need can consult their family doctor and obtain a customised walking exercise prescription, with appropriate recommendations on walking speed, duration and frequency. All members of the public are encouraged to walk more whenever possible, such as walk to work or school, or get off a few stops and walk the rest of the way to the destination when taking public transit; take the stairs instead of the elevators or lift; go for a walk after lunch or dinner. Weekends are great for family walks in a park or hill-walking with friends. For recommended walking trails, safety tips and points to note for walking (such as correct posture), or information about enrolling in the QualiWalk scheme of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, please visit https://www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/healthy/qualiwalk/qualiwalk4.html. For more information about Government key initiatives and specific actions to reduce population level of physical inactivity, please refer to the SAP which can be found at the Change for Health Website of DH https://www.change4health.gov.hk/en/saptowards2025/.

References
The Department of Health launched the “Healthy Hong Kong 2025 │ Move for Health” Campaign on 8 December 2018. The Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, along with the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan; the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services, Ms Michelle Li; the Commissioner for Labour, Mr Carlson Chan; the Director of Broadcasting, Mr Leung Ka-wing; the Controller of the Centre for Health Protection of the DH, Dr Wong Ka-hing; the Commissioner for Sports, Mr Yeung Tak-keung; and the Deputy Secretary for Education, Mr Woo Chun-sing officiated the opening of the event.

“Healthy Hong Kong 2025 │ Move for Health” Campaign is a key programme under the "Towards 2025: Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases in Hong Kong" (SAP). Under the campaign, various activities will be organised throughout the territory in the coming year to encourage the public to “move for health” and increase their physical activity to build an active lifestyle and prevent non-communicable diseases.

At the launch event, the Department of Health unveiled the campaign mascot “Lazy Lion”. The name Lazy Lion refers to the mascot’s laziness, which has stopped him from going outdoors and doing exercise - echoing some Hong Kong people’s reasons and excuses for not doing any exercise. Lazy Lion will continue to encourage the public to develop an active lifestyle by various means. Please follow his Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/lazylionhk) and Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/lazylionhk) pages for the latest “moves”.

Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) WATCH is dedicated to promote public’s awareness of and disseminate health information about non-communicable diseases and related issues, and the importance of their prevention and control. It is also an indication of our commitments in responsive risk communication and to address the growing non-communicable disease threats to the health of our community. The Editorial Board welcomes your views and comments. Please send all comments and/or questions to so_dp3@dh.gov.hk.

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