

Inactivity puts physical and mental health of more than 1.4 billion adults at risk, says WHO

Insufficient physical activity is a leading risk factor for non-communicable disease, negatively impacting mental health and overall quality of life, according to a newly released United Nations health agency study.

Published in The Lancet Global Health journal on Wednesday, the study highlights the well-established benefits of being physically active, including a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, hypertension and diabetes, as well as breast and colon cancer. Additionally, physical activity has positive effects on mental health, can delay the onset of dementia, and help people maintain a healthy weight.

“Unlike other major global health risks, levels of insufficient physical activity are not falling worldwide, on average, and over a quarter of all adults are not reaching the recommended levels of physical activity for good health,” warns the study’s lead author, Regina Guthold, of the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) in Switzerland.

The study details the levels of insufficient physical activity in different countries and estimates global and regional trends. Findings reveal that there has been no improvement in global levels of physical activity since 2001 and that some one-in-three women and one-in-four men globally are not active enough to stay healthy.

Unlike other major global health risks, levels of insufficient physical activity are not falling worldwide – Regina Guthold, lead author

Moreover, levels of insufficient physical activity are more than twice as great in high-income countries as compared to that of low-income nations, with a five per cent increase in higher income countries between 2001 and 2016.

There has been little progress in improving physical activity levels during that 15-year period, with data projecting that if these trends continue, the 2025 global activity target of a 10 per cent relative reduction in insufficient physical activity, will not be met.

Other main findings showed that by the end of 2016:

- In 55 of 168 countries, more than one-third of the population was insufficiently physically active.
- More than half of all adults in Kuwait, American Samoa, Saudi Arabia,

and Iraq were insufficiently active, while inadequate levels elsewhere of 40 per cent appeared in the United States, 36 per cent in the United Kingdom and 14 per cent in China.

- Only six per cent of adults in Uganda and Mozambique were insufficiently active – the lowest levels of all countries.
- The greatest levels of insufficient activity comparing women and men appeared in South Asia (43 versus 24 per cent), Central Asia, Middle East and north Africa (40 vs. 26 per cent), and high-income Western countries (42 vs. 31 per cent).
- Around one-in-three women and one-in-four men worldwide did not reach the recommended 150 minutes of moderate intensity, or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity per week.

Across regions, many individual countries recorded large differences in insufficient activity between women and men, such as 40 vs 16 per cent in Bangladesh, 31 vs. 14 per cent in Eritrea, 44 vs. 25 per cent in India, 48 vs. 32 per cent in the US and 40 vs. 32 per cent in the UK.

“Addressing these inequalities in physical activity levels between men and women will be critical to achieving global activity targets and will require interventions to promote and improve women’s access to opportunities that are safe, affordable and culturally acceptable,” said WHO co-author Fiona Bull.

The study is based on self-reported activity levels – including at work, home, and in transit, as well as during leisure time – for those aged 18 and above, from 358 population-based surveys in 168 countries, consisting of around 1.9 million people.