

Physical Activity and Health Strategy Program

Counseling by health professionals

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Nearly two thirds of Canadians are not considered active enough to sustain health. At the same time, medical studies have highlighted the benefits of physical activity, both in prevention of disease and as therapy for a spectrum of disorders. Family physicians play a central role in health promotion and are key counselors to increase patients' awareness about the benefits of physical activity.

To help increase current levels of activity, the College of Family Physicians of Canada, together with Health Canada, embarked on a Physical Activity and Health Strategy Program to promote physical activity and physical activity counseling tools to physicians. To better understand current issues in physical activity counseling and what has worked for other populations, we conducted a literature search. While few Canadian studies exist to date, an international body of medical literature about physical activity counseling by family physicians and other health care providers exists. Important findings of the literature search follow.

- Canadian studies have found that few family physicians routinely counsel patients on regular physical activity.
- Physician counseling on physical activity can influence patient behaviour in the short term.
- The most frequently cited barriers to counseling are time constraints, lack of financial incentive, lack of standard protocols, lack of success in the counseling role, and lack of training.
- Training in physical activity counseling increases the frequency of counseling and physician confidence in this role.
- Trained health care professionals, such as nurses, have taught health promotion effectively, including physical activity counseling.

Those who are interested in research about physical activity counseling and specific tools available may request a copy of the literature search by contacting Patricia Marturano, Project Coordinator, by telephone at (905) 629-0900, extension 203, or by e-mail at pmarturano@cfpc.ca. ♣