

Position Paper

AAPAR has the Solution to the Health Care Crisis

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of the

American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation

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Introduction

Each year more and more Americans suffer from debilitating health issues, many of them preventable. We read stories about how insurmountable medical costs have left some bankrupt and how others forego treatment for lack of coverage or the means to pay out of pocket. In response to the crisis, in March 2010 Congress passed a landmark health care reform bill. In addition, First Lady Michelle Obama's new initiative, [Let's Move!](#), launched in February 2010, is aimed at improving physical activity and nutrition, especially among school-aged children. At the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR) we want to make the solution to resolving the health care crisis even more clear. And our answer is simple:

Get up, get out, get moving!

Composed of more than 8,000 professionals and community leaders who promote lifelong physical activity and recreation for *every* body, AAPAR believes the most important thing people can do to solve the health care crisis is to become or remain physically active. You needn't be a world-class athlete or even skilled at any particular sport. Simply walking a few miles each day may be enough. What matters is that you engage in some form of physical activity daily.

Studies in aging and physical activity show that even previously inactive older adults benefit from regular moderate amounts of physical activity, citing improved quality of life. . Furthermore, those Seniors who have been willing and physically able to maintain a life-long pattern of exercise or athletic participation will usually approach their later years with extra capacity to delay the normal effects of aging (National Institute on Aging, 2009; Power et al., 2010). So it's never too late to get moving.

The Alarming Rate of Obesity

Although some risk factors such as age cannot be modified, many health risk factors can be controlled by modifying one's behavior such as stopping smoking and improving diet. In addition, physical inactivity has been associated with an increased risk of several types of cancer, metabolic disease, heart disease, and premature death (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2008a).

A recent study by the Harvard School of Public Health and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington estimated that smoking, high blood pressure, elevated blood glucose, and overweight and obesity reduce life expectancy in America by 4.9 years for men and 4.1 years for women (Goodarz et al. 2010). All four health risks are preventable.

Currently 32 states have a prevalence of obesity equal to or greater than 25%, and 6 states have a prevalence equal to or greater than 30%. Mississippi leads the way with 32.8% of their population being obese (CDC, 2008c). How did Americans get so fat? Quite simply, we eat too much and move too little. Engaging in regular physical activity can decrease health risks associated with overweight and obesity and improve mental and emotional well-being.



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In addition to these alarming statistics, a combination of poor diet and physical inactivity is now the second leading cause of preventable death after tobacco (Mokdad et al., 2004). The good news is that obesity and overweight, smoking, and lack of physical activity are all behavioral issues that can be changed. And it's never too late to start.

The Cost of Physical Inactivity

Research shows that behavioral factors account for 40% of premature deaths in America, yet only 4% is spent on prevention (Prevention Institute, 2007). In 2007 America's "total health expenditures reached \$2.2 trillion, which translates to \$7,421 per person, or 16.2% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product" (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services [CMS], 2008). The CMS also anticipates annual health spending to outpace average annual growth in the overall economy by 4.1% between 2008 and 2018. By 2018 national health spending is expected to reach \$4.4 trillion and comprise just over one-fifth (20.3%) of our Gross Domestic Product (CMS, 2007).

Although Americans spend more on health care than any other nation, we rank 42nd worldwide for life expectancy at birth at 77.7 years (Heron et al., 2006). Japan, with the world's 2nd highest life expectancy (82.3 years), spends \$2,581 per capita on health care costs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009). Compared with the Japanese, Americans live 4.6 fewer years yet spend \$4,840 more per person on health care than the Japanese.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS, 2001) reports that in the United States obesity cost about \$117 billion in 2000 and that 300,000 deaths each year are associated with obesity. **Engaging in regular physical activity has the potential to not only save money on health care related expenses but to also improve quality of life.** A recent analysis of population-wide and individually adapted physical activity interventions found potential cost-effectiveness ratios ranging between \$14,000 and \$69,000 per quality-adjusted life years gained compared to those receiving no interventions (Roux et al., 2008). It is estimated that in 2004, obesity and overweight in adults cost between \$98 billion and \$129 billion per year in national health care expenditures (Institutes of Medicine, 2004).

Benefits of Regular Physical Activity

The CDC (2008b) states that for adults health benefits can be achieved with just 30 minutes of moderate aerobic activity five or more days per week and muscle strengthening on two or more days per week. By engaging in more vigorous activity (defined as difficulty in saying more than a few words at a time while exercising), work-out time can be reduced to 1 hour and 15 minutes per week for aerobic activity. Some of the best news related to the health benefits of physical activity is that the recommended 30 minutes of aerobic activity can be broken up into three 10 minute or two 15 minute sessions.

Here are just a few specific benefits:

Benefit 1: Reduction in Health Risks

The HHS (2002) states that when performed on most days of the week, physical activity can reduce the following health risks:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Colon cancer
- Depression and anxiety, especially in youth
- Overweight and obesity
- Falling in older adults

Another aspect of regular physical activity is that it can help those who are ill manage their disease, leading to a possible reduction in health care costs and an improvement in quality of life.

Benefit 2: Reduction in Health Care Costs

According to World Health Organization/CDC Collaborating Center on Physical Activity and Health Promotion (2000), an investment of \$1 in physical activity (including both time and equipment) can lead to \$3.20 in medical savings.

Benefit 3: Improved Well-being

Regular physical activity promotes psychological well-being, leading to positive mental health outcomes such as improved self-esteem, reduced depression, decreased anxiety and stress, and improved body image. Regular physical activity is also linked to increased motivation, which is important in keeping people exercising (HHS, 2002).

Call to Action

Because so many chronic health issues are linked to a lack of regular physical activity, it is crucial to make a commitment to ourselves, our families, and our communities to get moving. Although not all health care costs can be eliminated or reduced through physical activity, many can. Besides, being active has emotional benefits as well. Individuals must take responsibility for their own health outcomes, and communities, governments, and employers can play a role, too. Below we list some examples of how each group can do their part to solve the health care crisis.

What Individuals Can Do

Becoming physically active can be difficult for inactive people. The Mayo Clinic (2009) cites several barriers to becoming active, including time constraints, being self-conscious, and not knowing which activities are best. Don't let these stop you. Re-arrange your priorities to make time. By making the time now to exercise you reduce the likelihood of having to spend time later waiting in doctors' offices, undergoing expensive medical treatments, and wading through insurance paperwork to pay for it...or worse, paying out of pocket for what could have been prevented in the first place.



Adding physical activity to your daily life does not mean you have to join a gym or perform like a topnotch athlete. Small efforts count. For instance, park your car farther away from the office or the store and walk the rest of the way. Set a goal of walking or riding your bike the whole way, if possible. Meet a friend for a walk at lunch, or walk with a neighbor or family member after dinner. As you become more accustomed to regular activity, you will be better prepared to increase the duration and intensity.

Active adults can have a tremendous impact on children's attitudes toward and participation in physical activity, as well. Research has shown that 4- to 7-year-old children of active parents were six times as likely to be active (American Psychological Association, 2009). Parents can provide healthy menu options and encourage children to pursue lifelong physical activities, like bicycling, while minimizing time spent watching television or playing computer games. Some computerized games, however, can get kids—and adults—moving. Activity based games such as Dance Dance Revolution not only provide a great aerobic workout, they're also fun.

Here are more suggestions:

1. If your work involves a lot of sitting, take frequent breaks. Get up and move!
2. Seek opportunities to increase physical activity throughout your daily routine, like taking the stairs instead of the elevator.
3. Wear a pedometer and aim for at least 7,000 steps each day.
4. Get off the bus one or two stops away from your stop and walk the rest of the way.
5. Play with your kids.
6. Do your own landscaping, gardening, and cleaning instead of paying someone else to get all that exercise.
7. Take a fitness break instead of a coffee/donut break. Walk up and down the stairs in your office or home for fifteen minutes or go outside for a walk around the block.
8. Ask your family members, staff, co-workers, and employers for their support in your physical activity efforts, which will have a positive impact on long-term adherence to exercise, and possibly encourage them to get involved, too.

What Educators & Schools Can Do

Educators must be positive role models and advocates for physical activity. School districts can go beyond offering traditional sports like basketball and football. Districts can incorporate a variety of both indoor and outdoor activities into the curriculum that students can engage in throughout their lives (yoga, skiing, archery, bicycling, tennis, etc.). This will encourage them to discover activities beyond the school walls and into adulthood. Quality physical education can be implemented in all school settings and can positively affect attitudes and behaviors associated with being physically active. Incorporating daily instruction in the schools, with a focus on promoting active lifestyle habits, is essential to the development of a physically educated adult.

One key to keeping children active is to educate them at a young age. Head Start Body Start National Center for Physical Development and Outdoor Play ([HSBS](#)) is co-managed by Head Start, AAPAR, and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education ([NASPE](#)). HSBS offers resources to Head Start and Early Head Start Center children, families, and staff to



encourage physical activity, outdoor play, and healthy eating. Studies show that both structured and unstructured physical activity lead to the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of young children and reduces obesity and its associated costs (NASPE, 2009).

Here are more suggestions:

1. Schools can partner with a local health and sport club and/or the local parks and recreation department to offer after-school programs and help shape students' attitudes about lifelong fitness. Workout programs, sports conditioning, fun and games, adapted activities, and school credit hours are among some of the things they could offer.
2. Start a [Walking School Bus](#) and instill good habits in children at a young age.
3. Check out [Head Start Body Start's Toolbox](#) for ideas on activities for young children.
4. Log on to [PELinks4U](#) for a wealth of information for teachers and families on promoting active and healthy lifestyles.
5. Incorporate into the classroom the U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services' [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#), loaded with information on the types and amounts of physical activity offering substantial health benefits.
6. And be sure to include *every* body in physical activity, regardless of ability level. AAPAR has links to [free resource manuals](#) to get you started. For more information on inclusion, contact AAPAR's [Adapted Physical Activity Council](#).

What Employers Can Do

Employers have many options for creating employee wellness programs, whether voluntary or compulsory. A compulsory program might require a yearly physical and a routine oral exam and teeth cleaning before employees are eligible to receive their employer's health benefits. Voluntary programs might offer financial or other incentives such as free fitness classes to increase participation. Program options include self-care guides and workshops, health advice services, health risks assessments, group fitness challenges, and smoking cessation classes.

A CNNhealth.com article details an example of a successful employee wellness program (Harding, 2009): Quest Diagnostics' voluntary program, HealthyQuest, is open to all employees, their spouses, and domestic partners. It uses results from preventative screenings and laboratory testing to create a personalized *Blueprint for Wellness*. In addition to free materials and programs such as fitness classes and a smoking cessation program, participating employees are given \$10 bi-weekly as an additional incentive. Steve Burton, vice president of health and wellness services at Quest Diagnostics, notes that even though the programs are free and offer a financial incentive, the company still saves about \$4.80 for every \$1 invested.

Burton states that HealthyQuest focuses on the most expensive health issues of obesity and smoking. He also notes that as a result of HealthyQuest, the company now has lower health care costs, with happier employees and fewer sick days used. In 2009 the National Business Group on Health awarded Quest Diagnostics their platinum honor as Best Employer For Healthy Lifestyles.



Here are more suggestions:

1. Start a workplace wellness program with incentives. Nonprofits and institutions may be eligible for grants and sponsorships to do so. See [Shippensburg University](#) in Pennsylvania and the Vermont Education Health Initiative (http://www.vehi.org/cfm/path_info.cfm).
2. Conduct annual wellness fairs for employees that include free health screenings. Invite local health clubs and the city/county parks and recreation department to do fitness demonstrations.
3. Include a section on your company's intranet where employees can access information on health, wellness, fitness, and nutrition.
4. Host a "fun run" or similar activity event that emphasizes personal fitness goals rather than competition.
5. Host your own "biggest loser" challenge with prizes for participants who meet personally established fitness goals.

What Communities & Governments Can Do

Governments and communities can collaborate in promoting active lifestyles in a number of ways. For example, improving or allowing access to walking and biking areas and green spaces can promote physical activity among community members and relieve traffic congestion.

Local and state governments can support the passage of the PHIT Act of 2009 ([H.R.2105](#)), a bill that encourages physical activity by amending the Internal Revenue Code of 1986. If passed it will allow a tax deduction of up to \$1,000 for qualified sports and fitness expenses (\$2,000 for married couples filing jointly or heads of household). This would include fitness center memberships, physical exercise programs, and exercise equipment that could be deducted as amounts paid for medical care.

Legislatively, developmentally appropriate physical education programs for pre-K-12 can be required in both private and public schools. The requirements would be based on the minimum amount of time recommended by the CDC. The CDC (2008b) states that children need a minimum of 60 minutes of physical activity each day and should include muscle and bone strengthening activities on at least three of those days. Other recommendations include requiring school physical education classes to be taught by teachers trained in physical education. In some schools, other teachers fulfill the role. In addition, at the national level require a certain number of hours each week of physical education activities for grades K-12, coupled with fitness testing.

Here are more suggestions:

1. Set up an action coalition and resource bank at the local and/or state level. See Louisiana Action for Healthy Kids (www.doe.state.la.us/LDE/nutritioned/1860.html)
2. Sponsor community runs and walks such as an American Heart Association [Heart Walk](#).
3. Offer adult education classes for a minimal fee that feature aerobics, dance, Pilates, kickboxing, and healthy eating cooking classes.



Summary

Parents, teachers, employers, government officials, and concerned citizens must work together to overcome the causes of obesity and other preventable diseases in both children and adults. Many employers, schools, and communities have successfully implemented programs and curricula that support and promote healthy lifestyle choices. With so many simple and relatively inexpensive solutions at our disposal, getting—and staying—physically active really only requires the determination, commitment, and willingness to devote the time and energy to it. This means finding something that works for you and sticking to it.

At AAPAR we believe physical activity is *the* key to solving the health care crisis.

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