

‘Eurobarometer’ survey highlights the challenges of getting Europeans active

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Physical activity facilitates good health, weight management and prevention of chronic diseases. It is recognised as beneficial to social, emotional and cognitive states. To support and inform European health promotion policy, a recent survey carried out for the European Commission examined participation in physical activity in the European Union. The survey highlights that the majority of Europeans do not engage enough in sport and health-enhancing physical activity. Women in general – and young women in particular – are far less active than their male counterparts. Also of concern is the extremely high level of inactivity above the age of 55.

This [Special Eurobarometer on Sport and Physical Activity](#) was published in 2014, following the comparable surveys from [2002](#) and [2009](#). Around 1,000 respondents from each of the 28 EU Member States were interviewed face-to-face in their mother tongue. Formal exercise and sport, and engagement in other types of physical activities such as cycling, dancing and gardening were assessed, along with time spent walking, or in sedentary pursuits such as sitting at a desk or watching TV.

Formal exercise

59% of interviewed Europeans seldom, or never, participated in formal exercise such as swimming or training in a fitness centre. 41% exercised at least once a week, 8% of which five or more times a week. People in Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) were the most likely to exercise regularly, but also people with a higher education level. Women were less likely to participate, and the frequency of formal exercise decreased with age. 64% of 15-24 year old men and women exercised at least once a week, compared to 30% in the 55+ age range.

Other types of physical activity

Europeans were more likely to engage in physical activity in informal settings such as outdoors, at home, or on the journey between home and school, work or shops, as well as at work or at school or university.

In total, 15% of Europeans engaged in cycling, dancing or gardening more than five times a week, mostly in the Netherlands (44%), followed by the Nordic countries. Overall, more than half of respondents seldom or never participated in these activities.

[Recent EU guidelines](#) on physical activity recommend 20 minutes of vigorous exercise at least three days per week, or 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise five days per week. However, 54% of the respondents did not do any vigorous activity (like digging, heavy lifting, or fast cycling), and 44% did not do any moderate activity (like carrying light loads, moderate cycling), in the past week. Men, the self-employed and manual workers were more likely to engage in this type of activity for more than an hour.

The guidelines also recognise the importance of walking, in blocks of at least 10 minutes. Six out of ten respondents reported walking for minimum 10 minutes for at least four days in the previous week. 15-24 year olds were the most likely to walk daily compared with 13% of people who did not walk for more than 10 minutes on any day in the previous week.

When it comes to sitting, 43% of EU citizens sat for between 2.5 and 5.5 hours per day. Those with higher education were more likely to sit more than eight hours. In Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, where respondents spent a long time sitting, the proportion of people who exercised or played sport on a regular basis was high. In Malta, Portugal and Romania, high proportions of respondents never or seldom exercised, despite shorter time spent sitting.

Barriers and motivators

The most common reason for being active was to improve health (62%), and control weight (24%). Other reasons include improved fitness (40%), relaxation (35%) and fun (30%). Lack of time was most common reason for not participating in sport (42%), with 20% stating lack of motivation or interest. A disability and cost were also mentioned as barriers.

There seems to be an enthusiastic minority who participates in formal physical activity, walking and engaging in other activities. However, about half of EU citizens do not appear to engage in any moderate or vigorous physical activity, and about 13% struggle to walk for more than 10 minutes a day. The report suggests that individual health and well-being messages about the importance of sport and physical activity are not getting through to the public. Opportunities to engage in physical activity should be promoted for both informal and organised settings.

For further information please see:

[Sport and Physical Activity Special Eurobarometer 412. \(2014\). European Commission.](#)

[EU physical activity guidelines – Recommended policy action in support of health-enhancing physical activity. \(2008\). European Commission.](#)

EUFIC Food Today. (2009). Guidelines for physical activity.