

Physical Activity in Manitoba: the Good, the Bad, the Urgency

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in motion Report
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Be honest. Do you take the elevator instead of walking up one flight of stairs? Do you always park as close as possible to the store? Do you drive three blocks instead of walking or cycling?

If your answer to one or all of these questions is yes, you may be putting yourself at greater risk of life-threatening diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and even cancer. That's right, cancer.

Now wait a minute, are we saying parking close to the store causes cancer? No. But if your lifestyle is geared to minimizing physical activity, or even if you get some physical activity, but it doesn't last long and seldom raises a sweat, research shows you are definitely putting yourself at increased risk for many serious diseases, including cancer. Unfortunately, this appears to be the case for too many Manitobans.

This study by the University of Manitoba, in partnership with *Manitoba in motion* and *Winnipeg in motion*, offers a glimpse of how physically active we are in Manitoba. It's similar to other studies that have gone before it, and is patterned after a *Saskatoon in motion* study. But it differs from the others in one very important way: we surveyed Manitobans about *all* types of physical activity—not just sports or exercise—including work, going places and house/yard work.

Most of us know that physical activity improves health. Research shows:

- Even a small amount of activity

is better than none; some health benefits, lowering blood pressure for example, happen with fairly low levels of activity.

- Different types of activities lead to different health benefits. For example, weight bearing activities promote bone health, while long duration activities increase “good cholesterol.” To fight against a wider range of diseases, people need to include in their daily lives more prolonged moderate and/or vigorous activity, as well as strength and flexibility activities.

At the outset, there were many things we wondered, including: How much physical activity are Manitobans getting? What kind of activities and how intense? Do they know that physical inactivity means more than being “out of shape,” but is linked to many life-threatening illnesses? What role do things like gender, age and education play?

With many chronic illnesses on the rise in Manitoba and the increasing burden it places on our health care system—which costs all Manitobans—the answers have never been more important.

As indicated earlier, there is some discouraging news. There is also some good news. But before going into details, a little bit about the survey.

What we did

We surveyed over 6,500 adult Manitobans from April 28 to June 30, 2005. One important goal was



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to establish a baseline measure of physical activity in Manitoba. That way, with follow-up studies we can see if things are changing. More immediately, it allows us to see how we stack up against guidelines set out in Canada’s *Physical Activity Guide* (PAG).

Canada’s PAG is the national reference for physical activity and health benefits. Its *main message* is “Every little bit counts, but more is even better. Everyone can do it.” It encourages Canadians to put more activity into their daily lives—like walking more, driving less—in addition to sports or exercise regimes. It emphasizes the F.I.T.T. philosophy of activity: how *frequently*, how *intensely*, how much *time*, and what *type*?

As a starting point, PAG recommends getting 60 minutes of *light* activity—activity that causes you a slight increase in breathing, heart rate, and body temperature—every day, or 30-60 minutes of *moderate* activity—intense enough to cause a moderate increase in breathing, increased heart rate and body temperature—or 20-30 minutes of *vigorous* activity—intense enough to cause heavy breathing, a rapid heart rate and sweating—4 times a week. The bottom line: a small amount of activity is better than none, but the more you do, the greater the health benefits.

In keeping with PAG’s message to build physical activity into daily life—at home, at school, at work, at play, or on the way—we asked Manitobans a series of questions. Essentially, we wanted to know: How much physical activity they’d had in the past week and what type (Fig. 1), the length of time they performed each, how they would rate their level of intensity—light, moderate, or vigorous—and

how aware they were about the link between physical activity and chronic illnesses.

Here are some of the more interesting things we found out.

Sex differences and other influences

- 70% of Manitobans surveyed meet the PAG guidelines. However, the majority do so through moderate activity (Fig. 2).
- The majority of females in Manitoba—even those in the 18-34 age group—do not participate at all in sports. The number gets fewer and fewer in older age groups. The story is quite different for men in the 18-34 age group, with only about 32% reporting no participation in sport. However, just like the women, participation in sports declines in successive age groups. Even by the 35-49 age group, 50% report no sports participation.
- Women in the 18-34 and 35-49 age group report getting “some” or “lots” of physical activity from exercise—70% and 63% respectively. But by the 50-64 group, over half report no physical activity from exercise. This trend to do less and less exercise as one ages is also seen in men. However, in all age groups, the percentage of men exercising is higher than it is for women.
- When we look at intensity of activity, we find some similarities between the sexes, and again some differences. While the majority of both sexes meet PAG’s basic requirement through *moderate* activity, for women the proportion increases as they age; for men it decreases.

Figure 1

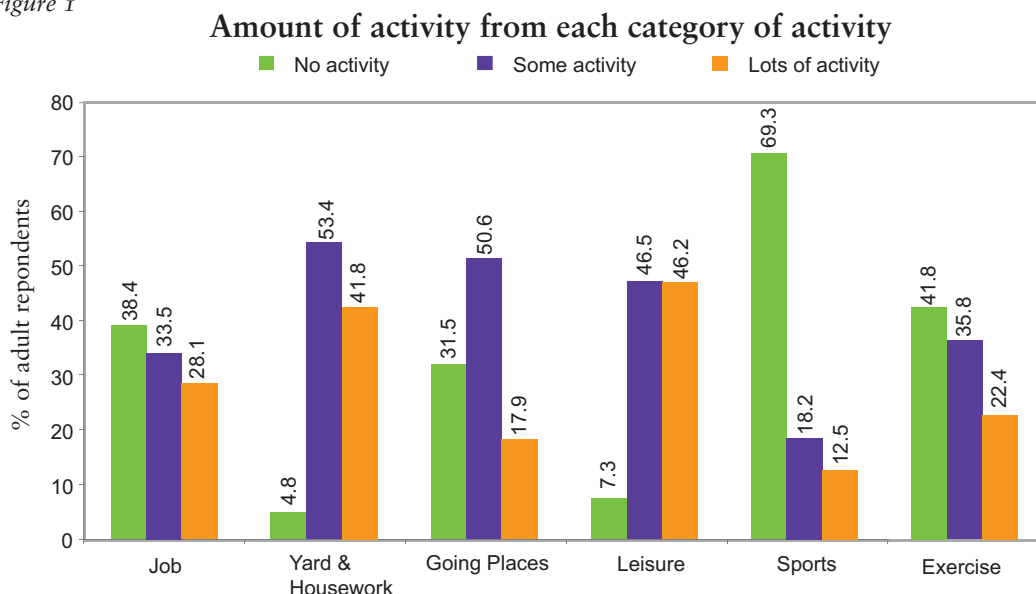
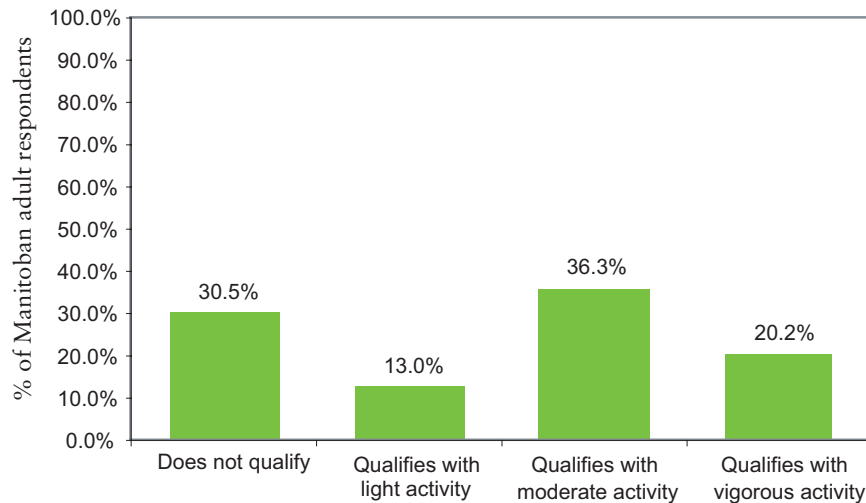


Figure 2

How Manitobans meet PAG requirements



- For both sexes, the likelihood of participation in vigorous activity declines with age.
- More people report getting some or lots of activity in yard and housework (95%) or going places (69%) than from participating in sports (30%) or exercise (58%) (Fig. 1).
- Overall, older men and women are less likely than younger men and women to agree that physical activity reduces the risk of disease. In the case of cancer, almost 50% of women 65-80+ actually disagree. Older men—a distressingly physically inactive group—were less likely than younger men to agree that physical activity reduces the risk for heart disease.

What gets in our way

The reasons people give for not being as physically active as they'd like—which we call *barriers*—are too numerous and complicated to detail here. For everyone, “other commitments” get in the way. Age, gender, work, income, education, commitments, kids, environment and chronic health conditions are some of the influences. But generally speaking:

- Men are more likely to cite work/volunteering commitments as a barrier. Women are more likely to cite kids/family/household commitments as a barrier.
- The less education and/or the lower a Manitoban's income, the less likely they are to participate in physical activity.
- For young people, time and other commitments are the biggest barriers. For older people, health problems are the biggest barrier.

Good news, bad news

As mentioned, the news is both good and bad. What appears to be good news—at least at first glance—is that close to 70% of Manitobans meet PAG's minimum or basic requirement for receiving at least some health benefit. It's also good to know that the majority of both sexes who meet PAG's basic requirement do so through moderate rather than light activity. Does that mean there's nothing to worry about?

Hardly.

All surveys have their limitations. For one thing, it is human nature to embellish or not tell the whole truth in surveys. We also suspect that some respondents over-estimated their activity levels or perceived intensity, and that fewer respondents actually crossed the minimum requirement line. And what about those we contacted who declined being surveyed? Again, given human nature, it makes sense to think that people who are not physically active would be the ones least likely to want to talk about it.

It should also be pointed out that our survey was done in late spring, largely to allow us to compare Manitoba results to the Saskatoon results. But what if we also surveyed Manitobans in the winter? Less yardwork, cycling, walking, less being out and about—our physical activity drops in the winter.

What it all adds up to is that the actual number of Manitobans who meet the minimum set out by PAG is likely lower than 70%, and that the physical activity of some of them is actually light rather than moderate.

But even if we take the results at face value—70% of Manitobans are meeting the *basic* level as set out in PAG—it is after all, a minimum standard.

Yes, it's a good start, and there are *some* health benefits. But to really have an impact on diseases, the minimum just isn't going to get it done.

Not to be forgotten, over 30% of adult Manitobans aren't doing much of anything physically. Projected across the province, we're talking about close to 270,000 people. That's not good.

It's also not good that so many Manitobans don't see the connection between an inactive lifestyle and some pretty serious illnesses.

Okay, so that's the bad news. Where do we go from here?

Let's focus on the positive. There are a good number of Manitobans getting regular *light* to *moderate* activity. If we cast that against PAG's "daily activity" plan, most of that is occurring at work and home, so we're glad we included that perspective. Otherwise the overall story would have been much different.

However, therein lies a bit of a catch. On the one hand, you can say with so many people at the *moderate* level, it's not far to get to the *vigorous* level, where we can really have an impact on health. Using PAG's F.I.T.T. model mentioned earlier—building to vigorous activity, 4 times a week for at least 20 minutes—that's roughly an hour and a half a week. For those not limited by health problems, that's doable.

However, it's tricky to do that on the job or doing yardwork. Realistically, there are more opportunities for vigorous activity *on the way* and especially *at play*—sports, exercise classes, weights, jogging, yoga, or whatever suits you.

Sports and exercise, for example, often involve intense, long-lasting physical activity. So we'd like to see more women involved in sports and exercise, and more men staying involved after age 50.

That being said, whatever level of activity they are at, if all Manitobans could increase it by, say, 10%, it would have a major beneficial impact on overall health in this province.

That's what we hope to see in our follow-up study in the next few years. We also hope to see an increase in the awareness of the link between being active and fighting disease. For example, right now less than 40% of Manitobans strongly agree that physical activity reduces your risk of some cancers. That needs to improve.

To that end, *in motion* is prepared to help. We're ready to work with groups—communities, schools, workplaces—interested in getting their people moving.

Want to develop physical activity strategies? Create awareness campaigns? We can assist you. Where appropriate, we may also provide modest start-up funding. To find out more, go to manitobainmotion.ca or winnipeginmotion.ca.

The bottom line on this look at physical activity in Manitoba is this: we have a ways to go. True, a lot of Manitobans meet PAG's basic requirement, but that's not enough to have much impact on health. PAG's guideline tells us more is better. Our study tells us more is needed. For some, it's a journey that begins with a single step, for others a flight of steps. Manitoba needs to get "in motion."

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Want the complete report?

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