

# A Generation At Risk: Low Physical Activity in Young Manitobans

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Summary by  
RJ Currie, based on the  
*in motion* Report  
Manitoba  
by the *in motion*  
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“D.” That’s the grade a recent study gave Canadian youth for leisure-time physical activity. Other studies tell us that: only 23% of Canadian children are getting the recommended level of exercise for health; there’s a link between inactivity and overweight children; obesity in children is on the rise; and inactivity and obesity are both associated with a number of chronic diseases.

So how are children doing here in Manitoba?

The news is similarly discouraging. As few as 10% of Manitoba children and teens get the amount of daily physical activity that Health Canada guidelines recommend. And while many of you are thinking that this will be of particular concern to Manitoba parents—and it should be—close to 94% of parents we surveyed think that *their* child “exercises regularly.”

These are just some of the interesting, perhaps surprising, findings in this study by the University of Manitoba, undertaken in partnership with *Manitoba in motion* and *Winnipeg in motion*. It answers questions about the physical activity of young Manitobans. It’s similar to other studies that have gone before it, and is patterned after a study by *Saskatoon in motion*. But ours differs from the others in one very important way: we surveyed Manitobans about *all* types of children’s physical activity—not just sports or exercise—including school, going places and day-to-day activities like chores.

Okay, so we’ve mentioned the downside of children not meeting

recommended guidelines, what are the benefits if they do? Physical activity:

- promotes normal growth and bone development;
- fosters psychological well being, self esteem and social development;
- helps maintain healthy weight in children and teens;
- reduces the risk for several chronic diseases—including diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer.

Now wait a minute, some of you are thinking, how often does a child die of a heart attack? These illnesses are much more of an adult problem aren’t they?

For the most part, that’s true. Type 2 diabetes, however, is a real health risk for children, especially if overweight. But an over-riding problem is that overweight children tend to grow up to be overweight adults; inactive children tend to become inactive adults. In other words, year after year, more and more Manitoba adults—adults as young as 18—are at increased risk of serious health problems, like diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

With that in mind, there were many things we wondered, including: How much physical activity are Manitobans ages 5-17 getting? What kind of activities and how intense? Does age or gender make a difference? Is there an awareness of the connection between inactivity and chronic disease?

When we consider the burden of childhood inactivity on



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not only young Manitobans but also on the health care system—which we all pay for—the answers have never been more important.

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. To get answers about children’s activity, we then asked each respondent if there were any kids 5-17 years of age living in the home. If there was, we asked about the activity levels of either a) the only child living at home, or b) the child having the next birthday.

If the child was 5-12 years, the adult answered for the child. If 13-14, either the adult would answer for the teen, or the teen would answer directly. If 15-17, only the teen would answer.

In all, we gathered information on 797 children ages 5-12, and 821 teens ages 13-17.

### *How much physical activity should kids be getting?*

One important goal of this survey was to establish a baseline measure of childhood 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).

PAG is the currently accepted physical activity guide for children in Canada. It recommends children work towards a 90 minute goal: 60 minutes of *moderate* activity and 30 minutes of *vigorous* activity daily. (In keeping with other studies, we interpret *daily* as five days per week.) Activities are defined by examples like walking, skating, or biking for *moderate*; running, basketball or soccer for *vigorous*.

But unlike PAG’s adult guide, the *minimum* amount of physical activity for children and youth is not clearly defined. Instead, progressive increases in physical activity coupled with decreases in non-active time are the suggestions.

PAG, then, is the focus of our study. However, we worried that it might exclude some kids whose weekly activity is not regular, and so falls outside

of PAG’s “daily” requirement. So for added perspective, we included a measure used in other studies called KKD—*kilocalories* (an energy measure) per *kilogram* (body weight) per *day*. The benefit of KKD is the activity doesn’t have to be daily, as it is with PAG. It can be averaged out over a week.

How we convert a week of different activities into a number is too complex to detail here. Simply put, recent physical activity guidelines for children and

adolescents recommend at least 6 KKD; that’s equivalent to about 45 minutes of a vigorous activity like soccer each day. But, say your kid rides a bike to and from school five minutes each way, and plays a few hours of shinny Wednesday evening, flies a kite all Saturday afternoon, and plays baseball Monday evening. Those combined activities would average to more than 6 KKD.

Equipped with these two “measuring sticks,” we asked a series of questions about day-to-day and leisure-time physical activity. Essentially, we wanted to know: how much physical activity the child/teen 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; and how aware they (teens aged 15-17) were about the link between physical activity and chronic illnesses.

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

### *How much physical activity are Manitoba children getting?*

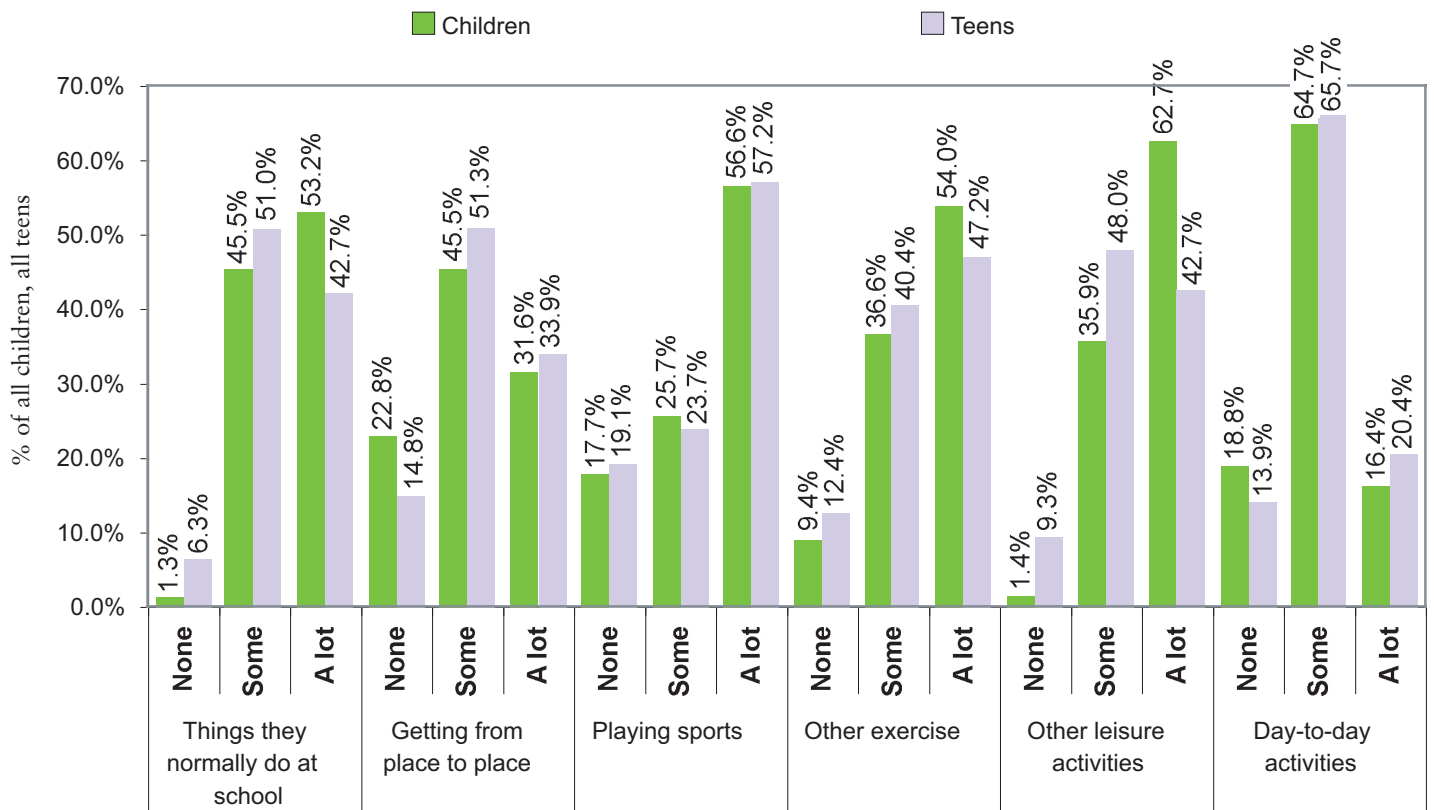
Among Manitoba children (ages 5-12):

- Fewer than 10% meet PAG’s recommendation of 60 minutes of moderate plus 30 minutes of *vigorous* activity daily.
- Fewer than 37% get 60 minutes of *moderate* activity daily.
- 52% meet the 6 KKD recommendations.
- Looking at where children get “a lot of activity,” sports (57%) and other leisure activities (63%) top the list. Conversely, day-to-day activities (16%) is at the bottom.
- Boys are more likely than girls to meet PAG and KKD goals.

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Figure 1

### Amount of activity children and teens get from each category of activity



#### How much physical activity are Manitoba teens getting?

Among Manitobans ages 13-17:

- Roughly 8% meet PAG’s recommendation of 60 minutes of moderate plus 30 minutes of vigorous activity daily.
- 21% get 60 minutes of moderate activity daily.
- Less than 50% meet the 6 KKD recommendation.
- Looking at where teens get “a lot of activity,” sports (57%) is well ahead of all other categories; day-to-day activities (20%) is well below.
- Males are more likely than females to meet PAG and KKD goals.

#### What holds kids back from physical activity?

- Only 15% of the ages 5-12 group and 18% of the teens report having a chronic health problem. But more than half of them say that in the past, the health problem didn’t hold them back.
- Females are more likely than males to be held back by a health condition.
- Respiratory conditions (like asthma) are

the most frequently cited health barrier.

- Among teen self-respondents, 63% cite “other commitments,” especially schoolwork, as holding them back the most.

This final bullet might come as a surprise. A lot of you are probably thinking that screen time—computers, video games, TV—is what most keeps kids from exercising, and maybe it is. But virtually none of them recognize it as a barrier to being active.

One other item of note is the disparity between perceived activity and what the numbers tell us. Parents believe that their child’s activity is enough to improve health, but it isn’t. Close to 94% of parents think their children exercise regularly. However, less than 10% of those children meet PAG’s 90 minute goal. Close to 82% of teens/parents think they/*their teens* exercise regularly. Of those teens, only 8% meet PAG’s 90 minute goal.

#### What’s it all mean?

Let’s start with some good news. A high percentage of teens believe in the benefits of physical activity for reducing chronic disease, especially heart disease. This may bode well for their future. However, this news is tempered by the fact that at present this awareness doesn’t appear to be

enough for them to adopt an active lifestyle.

Some might also consider it good news that our survey results are similar to others across the country. However, given that physical activity among all Canadian children may be at an all-time low, that's small consolation.

When we compare our results against what PAG recommends, the news gets more troubling. Overall, Manitoba's young people aren't getting nearly enough physical activity, and for sure not enough vigorous activity. Over 90% of Manitoba's 5 to 17 year-olds aren't meeting PAG's recommended goal of 60 minutes of moderate and 30 minutes of vigorous physical activity five days a week. Even against the lesser standard of 60 minutes daily of moderate activity, the news is still disturbing; roughly two-thirds of children and teens fall short.

However, from the KKD perspective, which is commonly used in other studies, the news is not so bad. Roughly half of Manitoba's children and teens are meeting the recommended energy expenditure of 6 KKD or more.

That being said, our PAG and KKD measures also included travel and day-to-day activities. Without that added perspective, the news would have been worse. Consider also that Manitoba teens are even less active than the children, which suggests a pattern of decline. Throw in the fact that our findings are based largely on parents' perceptions, and it all adds up to this: we may be further behind than it appears.

All of which is to say the situation is serious. Serious enough that in 2004 the Manitoba Government launched the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures* Task Force to talk to Manitobans about ways to encourage physical activity. They recognize it is critical not just to encourage children, but to foster an environment in which physical activity can thrive—and be fun. Schools, communities, government, and perhaps most importantly, family—all need to play a part.

To that end, *in motion* is prepared to help. We're ready to work with groups interested in getting their children, youth and their families moving. We can help them develop physical activity strategies, assist with awareness campaigns and provide resources. And that's not all. To find out more, go to [manitobainmotion.ca](http://manitobainmotion.ca) or [winnipegimotion.ca](http://winnipegimotion.ca).

The message seems clear: Manitoba kids need to get moving. We're talking about 60 minutes of moderate and 30 minutes of vigorous activity daily. Not all at once of course; they should work up to it. But they need to get there.

Inactivity in Manitoba's youth isn't just a kids' problem, it isn't just the parents' problem—it's everyone's problem. Our children have been given a "D" for physical activity. Let's all work together to change that to an "A."

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You can download it from our web sites: [www.manitobainmotion.ca](http://www.manitobainmotion.ca) and [www.winnipegimotion.ca](http://www.winnipegimotion.ca) or The Health Leisure & Human Performance Research Institute website: [www.umanitoba.ca/physed/research](http://www.umanitoba.ca/physed/research)