

7 Physical activity

7.1 Background

Physical inactivity is an important risk factor for a variety of diseases (US Department of Health and Human Services 1996), in particular cardiovascular disease. Until recently, health promotion guidelines related to physical activity have emphasised the need for sustained vigorous activity to achieve a health benefit.

New guidelines have recently been published in Australia that set out the 'minimum levels of physical activity required for good health' (Australian Sports Commission 1997). The main recommendation is that people take part in moderate physical activity for at least a total of 30 minutes per day on most days of the week. The 30 minutes need not be continuous but can be made up of bouts of activity of 10 minutes each. The new guidelines utilise the evidence brought together in the US Surgeon's General report (US Department of Health and Human Services 1996) and are being publicised by the organisations involved in Active Australia.

As well as promoting the new guidelines, Active Australia has also conducted a survey to determine how many Australians are currently meeting the recommended physical activity levels (Bauman 1999). The survey, conducted in 1997, collected information from people aged 18 to 75 years through a random household telephone sample. Questions on the amount of time spent walking and doing moderate and vigorous physical activity were asked. Active Australia intends to repeat the survey to assess whether people are adopting the advice on physical activity.

An important source of advice and information on health-promoting behaviour, such as physical activity, is a person's GP (Bull & Jamrozik 1998). However, little is known about whether people who attend general practice are more or less active than the population at large or whether activity levels among these people are related to the reasons that they attend a doctor's surgery. The inclusion of these SAND questions in BEACH was intended to provide some of this information

7.2 Research questions

1. What are the levels of physical activity in general practice patients?
2. Is the level of activity in general practice patients considered sufficient?

7.3 SAND questions

Box 7.1: Physical activity

GPs asked the patients:

- ◆ *In the past week, how many times have you walked continuously, for at least 10 minutes?*
- ◆ *Please estimate total walking time.*
- ◆ *In the past week, how many times did you do any vigorous physical activity which made you breathe harder or puff and pant? (e.g. tennis, jogging, cycling, excluding house work or gardening).*
- ◆ *Please estimate total vigorous activity time.*
- ◆ *In the past week, how many times did you do moderate physical activities? (e.g. lawn bowls, golf, gentle swimming, excluding house work or gardening).*
- ◆ *Please estimate total moderate activity time.*

7.4 Results

Sample size (18–75 years) was 2,677 patient encounters for 185 GPs.

Among patients in general practice, the most common form of physical activity was walking. More than two-thirds of people reported walking in the previous week, while only about one in four reported having done some form of moderate (27.3%) or vigorous (23.0%) physical activity. Information was not recorded for 10.8%, 15.1% and 15.7% of the questions on walking, moderate and vigorous physical activity, respectively.

The proportion of patients attending general practitioners who reported engaging in physical activity appeared less than that for the Australian population, although the pattern was broadly similar (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1: Patient reported physical activity levels

	Walking ^(a)			Moderate ^(a)			Vigorous ^(a)		
	None	1–2	3+	None	1–2	3+	None	1–2	3+
SAND respondents	31.8	14.2	54.0	72.6	14.8	12.5	77.0	12.7	10.3
Australian population ^(b)	25.0	17.3	57.7	69.9	19.6	10.5	56.6	19.6	23.9

(a) Sample size: walking n=2,373; Moderate n=2,273; Vigorous n=2,256

(b) Source: Australian Sports Commission

Active Australia defines 'sufficient activity' as at least 150 minutes, spread over five sessions per week, of moderate intensity physical exercise (Australian Sports Commission 1997). One third (34.7%) of respondents in the SAND survey who reported doing sufficient exercise (as defined by Active Australia) was 34.7%. Ten per cent of people did not have enough information recorded to calculate an exercise level. The proportion doing sufficient exercise was considerably less than that in the Active Australia (60.1%) survey.

Those in the younger age groups were more likely to have done sufficient exercise than the older age groups in both surveys. However, in contrast to the results from the Australian population, females in the general practice patient population were less likely to do sufficient exercise than males.

7.5 Discussion

The SAND survey suggests that people seen by their GP are less active than the general population. One of the possible explanations for this result is that the Active Australia survey was a telephone survey to households, whereas the SAND survey was conducted by GPs who recorded data about their patients whether seen in the surgery, at home, in a nursing home or in hospital. Another possible reason is that due to space limitations on the recording form it was not possible to collect data on household and gardening activities which were included in Active Australia's measure of sufficient exercise.

Despite these limitations, the data will provide GPs with a better understanding of the physical activity levels of the people whom they treat. In addition, because it has been collected as part of the BEACH survey, relationships between physical activity and the conditions for which people are treated in general practice can be investigated.