

## Cover Story



## Promotion of physical activity among Sri Lankans

Sherine J Balasingham

National Programme Manager, Physical Activity Promotion, Directorate of Non-Communicable Diseases, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka

\*Correspondence: sherinejb@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2530-193X>

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**Cover photos:** The cover shows members of communities engaging in aerobic sessions outdoors and indoors. These sessions are led by public health staff based on the Trainer Manual on Promotion of Physical Activity in Primary Healthcare Facilities developed by the Directorate of NCD in collaboration with SLSMA.

**Graphic design:** Upula Vishwamithra Amarasinghe

Regular physical activity of sufficient duration and intensity provides many health benefits which include prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (NCD) as well as improving spiritual and mental wellbeing. Being physically active does not imply that an individual must allocate separate time and physical space nor engage in aerobic exercise or workouts. It could be integrated into daily activities either at home, workplace or educational settings. Cycling and walking as modes of transport, activity-based education, short exercise breaks, standing tea breaks at workplaces are a few among many proposed methods to be physically active. The Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030: more active people for a healthier world recommends four strategic objectives: create active societies, create active environments, create active people and create active systems which could be adapted by all countries. The WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour recommends that an adult should engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate levels of physical activity.

The National Programme on Promotion of Physical Activity was established as a separate entity within the Directorate of NCD of the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka during the year 2019. The programmes planned, implemented and monitored are in alignment with the recommendations of the World Health Organization. This programme focuses on the promotion of physical activity in three settings: community, educational (preschools, schools and higher education institutions) and workplaces. Medical officers for NCD attached to offices of the regional director of health services (RDHS) are the focal points responsible for programme implementation and monitoring at district level. The activities of the programme are planned and implemented in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Sports Medicine Association (SLSMA) both at national and district levels. Membership of the Technical Working Group on Promotion of Physical Activity representing all relevant stakeholders enable efficient, effective and sustainable programme implementation.

The availability of healthy lifestyle centres (HLC), which have been established at primary medical care institutions (PMCI), made it possible to reach the community. All clients who arrive at HLCs are screened for NCDs and their risk factors. In addition, they are encouraged to join regular physical activity promotion programmes; aerobic exercise sessions, short exercise sessions organized and conducted by PMCI. Training of trainer programmes conducted by a national level team representing the Directorate of NCD and SLSMA for all medical officers for NCD, medical officers in charge of PMCI and medical officers conducting HLCs have enabled trained teams at all HLCs, to conduct regular sessions on physical activity. Lack of availability of adequate space has not deterred the teams or members of the community who engage in these programmes in whatever possible manner and available places.

Figure shows members of communities engaged in aerobic sessions outdoors: community playground, pathway to the HLC and indoors: premises of PMCI, community halls, led by a public health nursing officer (PHNO) who is a member of the HLC team. It also shows patients who attend medical clinics at PMCI engaging in short exercise sessions. The availability of the Training of Trainers Manual on Promotion of Physical Activity in Primary Healthcare Facilities developed by the Directorate of NCD in collaboration with SLSMA paved the path for successful implementation of the programme in community settings. Furthermore, video and audio recordings on aerobic sessions of half an hour duration and short exercise sessions have been developed and disseminated right up to grassroot levels. Members of the community empowered with the knowledge and training obtained have initiated many programmes to promote physical activity at village and household levels.

Several initiatives have been commenced by the national programme to advocate relevant authorities on promotion of physical activity in educational settings and workplaces. The national programme developed a communication campaign in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Health Promotion Bureau, National Institute of Sports Medicine and National Institute of Sports Science with the objective of advocating officials of the school sector and encouraging parents and students on the implementation of existing regulations to discourage physical inactivity among school children. Further, identified focal points representing health and non-health partners are being trained by the team at national level with a view to discouraging sedentary lifestyle at workplace settings. National guidelines are being developed for these settings in collaboration with all stakeholders which focus on integration of feasible and sustainable methods of promoting physical activity during study time and while at work.

## References

1. WHO. *Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018–2030: More Active People for a Healthier World*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2018. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
2. WHO. *WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour: at a Glance*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2020. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.