

The Research File



Summary from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute and ParticipACTION

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Ethnicity and physical activity



Physical activity is associated with many health benefits such as stress reduction, increased energy levels and maintenance of a healthy body weight. Similarly, physical inactivity is associated with chronic diseases, disability and premature death.¹ Although there is strong evidence for the benefits of physical activity; overall, Canadians lead an inactive lifestyle.² In particular, it has been observed that the physical activity levels are significantly lower in North American and European immigrant

populations and ethnic minorities compared to the general population. Initially, immigrants that arrive to North America and Europe are found to be healthier than the native-born population, a phenomena known as the *healthy immigrant effect*; however taking age groups into account immigrants' health appears to decline over years of residence in Canada.³

A recent study by Dogra et al. utilized data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) to explore participation in various forms of physical activity by ethnicity and time-since-immigration (self-reported).⁴ The study found significant demographic differences and varying levels of physical activity between groups. For example, obesity was more prevalent among Whites than any other ethnic minority, not including Aboriginals. As expected, recent immigrants were younger than established immigrants and non-immigrants. The largest part of Aboriginal population had less than post-secondary education, whereas the highest proportion of West-Asians and South Asians had post-secondary education. Income-wise, recent immigrants had a lower prevalence of high income, while established

immigrants had a comparable income to non-immigrants.⁴

In terms of physical activity, non-White ethnic groups had a higher proportion of individuals who reported being inactive compared to Whites. More Whites and non-immigrants reported participating in recreation activities (i.e., gardening, golfing, fishing, bowling, or dance) than ethnic minorities and immigrants did. Yet, the West Asian males had a similar prevalence of endurance (i.e., swimming, running or jogging, cycling, or rollerblading), conventional exercise (i.e., home based exercise, aerobics classes, or weight training), sport (i.e., volleyball, basketball, ice hockey, ice skating, snowboarding or skiing, baseball, tennis, or soccer) and active commuting (i.e., walking or cycling to work or school) when compared to Whites.⁴

When evaluating physical activity by time-since-immigration, the study found that immigrants were less likely to report endurance, walking, sports and recreation activities, but more likely to report an active commute and physical inactivity compared to non-immigrants. Recent immigrants were also less likely to participate in conventional forms of exercise;



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whereas established immigrants had comparable exercise levels when compared to non-immigrants. Moreover, established immigrants reported a similar rate of active commuting compared to non-immigrants, while recent immigrants had a lower rate of engaging in endurance activities when compared to non-immigrants.⁴

In addition, the study found that all ethnic minorities and immigrant groups were more likely to participate in conventional forms of exercise such as aerobics, home-based exercise and weight training when compared to Whites and non-immigrants; except for Aboriginal people and West-Asians. On the other hand, all ethnic and immigrant groups were less likely to engage in endurance exercise and recreation activities. Moreover, when compared to Whites, all ethnic minorities reported lower rates of walking, with the exception of Aboriginal people.⁴ The findings of this study may have implications for tailoring culturally appropriate interventions for Canadians; especially when targeting specific immigrant and ethnic groups.

References:

- ¹ Health Canada. Healthy living: Physical activity. Available at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/physactiv/index-eng.php>. Accessed on November 28th, 2011
- ² Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. Bulletin 02: Physical activity levels of Canadians. Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute 2010. Available at http://72.10.49.94/media/node/82/files/PAM-2008FactsFigures_Bulletin02_PA_among_CanadiansEN.pdf.
- ³ Ng E. The healthy immigrant effect and mortality rates. Statistics Canada 2011. Available at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2011004/article/11588-eng.htm>
- ⁴ Dogra et al. Variation in mode of physical activity by ethnicity and time since immigration: a cross-sectional analysis. International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity 2010, 7:75.



What have we learned?

- All ethnic groups including Aboriginal people were less likely to engage in recreation, sport activities and endurance and more likely to have an active commute compared to Caucasian
- Ethnic groups were less likely to engage in walking and more likely to report physical inactivity when compared to Whites, except for the Aboriginal people
- Both recent and established immigrants were more likely to report active commuting, but less likely leisure time physical activity. More specifically, they were also less likely to participate in walking, sport activities, recreation and endurance activities.
- Immigrants and ethnic minority groups in Canada are more inclined to participate in conventional forms of exercise compared to non-immigrants and Whites and less likely to engage in recreation activities, sports and endurance exercise.
- When developing health promotion programs targeting immigrant and ethnic groups at higher risk for chronic disease, the physical activity preferences should be considered in intervention development.