



Mind the Gap - Exploring knowledge about physical activity in Ireland and Northern Ireland

Executive summary

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Executive summary



Executive Summary

Aim

The proven health benefits of physical activity and the consequences of inactivity provide a compelling case for promoting physical activity across all ages and demographics. However, little is known about how knowledgeable the adult population in Ireland and Northern Ireland is about these benefits, about physical activity recommendations and about sources of information on these. To address this knowledge gap, the Institute of Public Health (IPH) commissioned a survey in Ireland and Northern Ireland, using comparable questions and populations, to explore:

- Knowledge of the benefits of physical activity for mental and physical health.
- Knowledge of the risks to health of inactivity.
- Knowledge of physical activity recommendations.
- The relationship between knowledge of physical activity recommendations and physical activity levels.
- Sources of information about the benefits of physical activity.

The overarching goal was to produce data that could help inform the development of public health interventions, services, and policy to increase physical activity at a population level in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, by understanding whether knowledge of physical activity guidelines and benefits differ according to demographics, where people get their knowledge from, and if knowledge equates to higher levels of physical activity.

Method

The Institute of Public Health commissioned LucidTalk* to undertake a survey in Ireland and Northern Ireland with a representative sample of adults aged 18+ in 2021. The survey in Northern Ireland had 2,223 respondents drawn from an opinion panel of 13,000+ people which was carried out online. The survey in Ireland had 1,279 respondents drawn from an opinion panel of 30,000+ people and was also carried out online. The report was compiled by IPH based on data analysis provided by LucidTalk.

*LucidTalk Limited is a Polling and Market Research company covering Northern Ireland and Ireland
<https://www.lucidtalk.co.uk/>

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Key findings



Key findings

Knowledge:

- Half the population in Ireland (46%) and a third in Northern Ireland (33%) know the weekly recommendations to do at least 150 minutes of physical activity.
- There is high awareness in both Northern Ireland and Ireland of the benefits of physical activity with between seven and nine out of 10 people aware that it can help manage weight, stress, mental health, certain long-term conditions and joint and bone health.
- The benefits of activity for brain health and the immune system are less well known and this lack of knowledge was more pronounced among older people.
- There is strong awareness in Northern Ireland and Ireland that inactivity increases risk of heart disease, depression, diabetes and joint pain, but much less awareness of the link to cancer and falls.
- A third of older people in Northern Ireland (33%) and less than half in Ireland (48%) are aware of the link between inactivity and certain cancers, whereas three quarters of younger people were aware of this (Northern Ireland – 74%, Ireland-77%).
- Women tend to be more knowledgeable than men about many of the health benefits of physical activity. For example, in Northern Ireland, 85% of women and 69% of men were aware that it can improve joint and bone health. However, this does not translate into higher levels of activity among women.
- Women are more knowledgeable than men about the weekly recommendations for activity in Northern Ireland (37% v 30%) but are less active. In Ireland men are more knowledgeable (48% v 45%) and more active than women.
- People from lower socioeconomic grouping, or those with lower levels of education, were much less likely than those from higher groupings or with a higher level of education to know the benefits of physical activity for health, e.g. in Ireland to manage diabetes or heart disease (60% v 75%) and in Northern Ireland to improve the immune system (62% v 71%).
- Media, including newspapers, TV, radio and websites, are the most common source of information about the health benefits of physical activity in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, though for younger people, social media and the workplace are also important.
- Men are more likely than women to get information on the health benefits of physical activity from family, friends and, in Northern Ireland, from healthcare professionals.



Activity Levels:

- 28% of people in Northern Ireland and 35% of people in Ireland are active five days or more per week. One in six people (17%) in Northern Ireland and one in seven (14%) in Ireland are inactive, i.e. do no activity at all.
- Women were much less likely to be active than men in both Northern Ireland (26% v 31%) and Ireland (31% v 39%). They were also much more likely to be inactive in Northern Ireland (20% v 14%) and Ireland (18% v 11%).
- Older people aged 65+ were more likely to be inactive than younger people (18-24) in both Northern Ireland (20% v 15%) and Ireland (17% v 6%).
- People who knew the recommendation, to do at least 150 minutes per week of physical activity, were significantly more likely to be active than those who didn't know (37% v 30%). However, when analysed by gender, this association was only true for men and not for women.
- Men who knew the recommendation to do at least 150 minutes per week, were active on average 3.8 days per week - significantly higher than the average of 3.3 days for men who weren't aware of them. However, for women there was no significant difference in activity levels.



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Recommendations



Recommendations

Increasing physical activity

Increasing physical activity levels is the cornerstone to increasing population health. Reversing the trends towards inactivity and fostering a culture of physical activity for health requires a “whole-of-society” framework which takes a life course approach and addresses social, economic, physical, environmental and gender based barriers.

Communications

Increasing knowledge of the benefits of physical activity must be a priority, especially simplified messaging on the number of minutes and types of physical activity needed to get benefits. Both traditional and new media should be utilised as much as possible to promote activity. While social media may be easier and cheaper to use, it cannot be the default mode of communication, as it is crucial to reach all layers of society.

Increasing knowledge

At a population level, knowledge of the benefits of physical activity and the consequences of physical inactivity has an association with increased physical activity. It is imperative to keep promoting the health benefits of physical activity and the consequences of inactivity, in particular to target these messages at groups with lower health literacy.



4 Conclusion



Conclusion

Getting the population active remains a real challenge for government both in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This report highlights the growing awareness of the benefits of physical activity and the consequences of physical inactivity and the role of non-formal sources of information. It also highlights the information gap between older and younger cohorts, as messages about the significant health benefits of activity and the risks of inactivity are not reaching older age groups as frequently. However, most importantly this survey also demonstrates that knowledge of physical activity benefits does not always equate to action, especially amongst women. This highlights the need to understand and address barriers to increased physical activity to ensure the needs and interests of the whole population are met.





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