
Physical activity and health in the European Union

Prof. Abel is editor-in-chief of this journal

In two consecutive issues (SPM 49/4 and SPM 49/5) SPM is publishing four articles on physical activity in 15 member states of the European Union. The articles cover (1) relationships between physical activity and subjective health (Abu-Omar et al. 2004b), (2) the prevalence of physical activity (Rütten & Abu-Omar 2004b), (3) relationships between physical activity and mental health (Abu-Omar 2004a) and (4) the perception of environmental opportunities for physical activity (Rütten & Abu-Omar 2004a). All data originate from the “health” Eurobarometer 58.2 and feature a total of 16 230 face-to-face interviews from 15 member states of the European Union (sample sizes in most nations range about 1 000). Data were collected in the months October–December 2002.

The data presented offer new opportunities to compare physical activity and health levels across the European Union. They are of high importance for a number of reasons:

1. Large scale comparisons of physical activity levels in the European Union have so far only been possible for leisure-time physical activity (Martinez-Gonzalez et al. 2001). Recommendations for physical activity have changed however, and now suggest adults to engage in “health enhancing physical activity” including leisure-time physical activity, as well as physical activity at work, at home, or for the purpose of transportation (Pate et al. 1995). The data in the two issues thus allow, for the first time, a comparison of physical activity levels across the European Union following these new recommendations.

2. Physical activity was assessed in the Eurobarometer with the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ). The IPAQ has been developed especially for the purpose of allowing the cross-cultural comparison of physical activity levels and the short version of the IPAQ that was used in the Eurobarometer is specifically recommended for that purpose. The IPAQ adheres to international recommendations for physical activity and assesses physical activity not only in leisure-time, but also at work, at home, or for the purpose of transportation. The IPAQ has been tested for validity and reliability in an collaborative international project and has been deemed to have measurement properties that are comparable to other instruments for the self-assessment of physical activity (Craig et al. 2003).

3. The findings from those four studies published now in SPM demonstrate the significance of physical activity for health across 15 member states of the European Union. The respective results can be used as a powerful argument for the promotion of physical activity on an EU level.

Publishing these comparative data, SPM wants to encourage other public health scientists to make intensified use of cross-national survey and surveillance data available. Exploring health and its determinants, a comparative perspective provides valuable knowledge for the public health sciences and for health policy and planning.

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