Physical activity and men's health

Why is physical activity an important public health measure?
It is well recognised that physical activity is important for good health. A lack of physical activity is linked to an increased risk of serious chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. In fact, people who are not active are almost twice as likely to die from a heart attack compared to those who are active. After cigarette smoking, physical inactivity is the most important modifiable factor contributing to the high burden of chronic disease in our community.

Less than half of the Australian population are physically active at a level that can maintain good health. The proportion of the population who are physically inactive has increased over recent years, along with rising levels of being overweight. It is predicted that these trends will result in an even greater burden of chronic disease in the future. Therefore, there is an increasing focus on making physical activity a priority for public health.

Can increased physical activity prevent disease?
Men suffer from high rates of cardiovascular disease; coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death in Australian men, responsible for about one-fifth of all male deaths in 2005. Preventing cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and addressing common risk factors (smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, being overweight) is therefore particularly important for men. Research clearly shows that higher levels of physical activity throughout life:
- reduce the likelihood of early death, caused by cardiovascular disease
- reduce the number of new cases of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes
- lower body weight, blood pressure and cholesterol levels

Research shows clearly that physical activity can lower the rate of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity & high cholesterol in the community

Is physical activity linked to male reproductive health?
There is increasing evidence for links between cardiovascular health and male reproductive health, which is another good reason for men to think about being more physically active.

ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION
It is becoming clear that erectile dysfunction (ED) is not only linked with cardiovascular disease (as they often happen together) but ED can be an early warning sign of cardiovascular disease. ED has been shown to give the same level of risk for a future cardiovascular event (such as a heart attack) as having a family history of heart disease or being a cigarette smoker, particularly when ED happens in younger men.

Erectile dysfunction and cardiovascular disease have some common underlying causes and share risk factors, including a low level of physical activity. Many studies have shown that men who have high levels of physical activity have lower rates of erectile dysfunction. Engaging in moderate levels of physical activity (for e.g. 30 minutes of exercise each day) may help to prevent both erectile dysfunction and cardiovascular disease.

PROSTATE CANCER
A link between low levels of physical activity and prostate cancer in men has not been shown in research, but some research shows that very high levels of physical activity may protect against aggressive forms of prostate cancer (e.g. cancers that spread quickly). More research needs to be done to understand these possible links better.

Including physical activity when men are being treated for prostate cancer to improve quality of life may be helpful. In men with prostate cancer, physical activity can help to lower the chance of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and osteoporosis, which may occur in men receiving androgen deprivation therapy to reduce testosterone levels. Physical activity may also reduce side-effects of treatment as well as depression and anxiety in prostate cancer survivors, as has been shown in other cancers.

It therefore seems helpful for men to include physical activity in their lifestyle following a prostate cancer diagnosis.

However, we presently know little about whether men with prostate cancer experience barriers to physical activity after a diagnosis or what might help them to become more active.

OTHER PROSTATE DISEASE
There is evidence for a link between increasing levels of physical activity and lower rates of benign prostate enlargement (BPH, benign prostatic hyperplasia) or bothersome urinary symptoms (LUTS, lower urinary tract symptoms). These findings suggest that physical activity might help in preventing these prostate problems.

Research showing links between low physical activity and erectile dysfunction, prostate enlargement and urinary symptoms suggests that having an active lifestyle may help men to maintain reproductive health, and general health and well-being

MALE INFERTILITY AND TESTOSTERONE LEVELS
The rising levels of being overweight in the community, linked closely to lower levels of physical activity, are particularly important for male reproductive health.

Obese men are more likely to have low testosterone levels and erectile dysfunction, and as a group are less fertile than normal weight men. Obesity is also a major risk factor for type 2 diabetes (sometimes called adult-onset diabetes), a condition where blood glucose levels are higher than normal.
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Men with type 2 diabetes have rates of erectile dysfunction up to twice as high as men without diabetes and are at risk of low testosterone levels. Testosterone is needed for muscle strength, maintenance of bone, and is important for male sexual and reproductive health.

Men with diabetes who are not able to keep their blood glucose levels well controlled with medicines, insulin or other means, and men who have both diabetes and obesity, are at most risk of male reproductive problems.

Reducing body weight in obese or overweight men, with or without diabetes, may have positive effects on reproductive health but preventing obesity in the first place is the best way to reduce risk for the conditions linked with obesity and type 2 diabetes.

Along with dietary changes, physical activity is very important in either keeping a healthy weight or losing weight if needed.

Exercise/weight loss programs may help some overweight men with erectile dysfunction to improve their erectile function

Can treatments for reproductive health problems work better when combined with physical activity?

The possible benefit of increased physical activity, when taking drugs or other treatments for male reproductive conditions, is not clear. However, it has been suggested that for men with cardiovascular disease or diabetes, increasing physical activity may not only better control these health problems, but also improve the effect of any drug treatment for ED.

While further research is still needed, including physical activity into prevention and treatment programs for men with reproductive health problems would appear to be helpful.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FOR ALL MEN

Living with a reproductive health problem can affect men psychologically as well as physically. Relationships can suffer, quality of life can be reduced and social interactions affected. There are many ways for men to get help with these issues including speaking to professionals or to other men in a similar situation.

Also, the benefit of physical activity in managing depression and anxiety, and for improving general quality of life, makes it even more important to include physical activity in the management of male reproductive health conditions.

The good news is that even moderate levels of activity, such as walking, appear to lower the risk of a range of health problems. So get moving today, and improve your reproductive and general health.

Moderate physical activity such as brisk walking is important for general health and male reproductive health – just 30 minutes a day can help!

How can I include physical activity into my life to maintain my general and reproductive health?

Be active everyday in as many ways as you can. Ways to increase your daily physical activity:

- Walk or cycle instead of using the car
- Take the stairs rather than the lift
- Play with children in an active way
- Invite friends, family and work colleagues to be active with you

Source: ‘Physical activity guidelines for adults’ developed by the Department of Health and Ageing.
Website: www.health.gov.au.

Contact your local council to find out about physical activity programs in your area.

For more information on the links between physical activity and male reproductive health visit www.andrologyaustralia.org or visit your doctor.

Being overweight, diabetes and male reproductive health problems are linked – physical activity may help in preventing these health problems

Has increased physical activity been shown to improve reproductive health problems?

While the links between physical activity and male reproductive health problems are clear, there is little research showing that physical activity actually prevents or reduces these problems.

An Italian study demonstrated that an exercise program improved erectile function in some overweight men with erectile problems.

This study is the beginning of evidence for including physical activity with other treatments for erectile dysfunction. This will also have benefits for cardiovascular and general health.

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