

# Obesity and sedentary lifestyle - a practical national initiative using existing digital technologies

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## Abstract

A WHO report in June 2024 highlighted that 1.8 billion adults, nearly one third (31%) of adults worldwide, did not meet recommended physical activity levels in 2022. It further reported failing to achieve these goals drastically increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers.

The World Health Organization (WHO) outlined that adults require at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week to maintain optimal health.

The study showed that almost half of the world's countries have made some improvements over the past decade, and 22 countries were identified as likely to reach the global target of reducing inactivity by 15% by 2030, if their trend continues at the same pace.

The National Health Services (NHS) of the UK has, in response, initiated a national program using digital technology which is due to commence in January 2027. The scheme, called Movement 26.2 tracks individual efforts via a 'smartwatch' or 'smartphone' and incentives are provided to individuals who are rewarded shopping vouchers or discounts if they meet their monthly targets of 26 miles.

**Key words:** physical inactivity, digital technology, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, national fitness programs

## Background

A WHO report in June 2024 highlighted that 1.8 billion adults, nearly one third (31%) of adults worldwide, did not meet recommended physical activity levels in 2022.

It further reported failing to achieve these goals drastically increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers.

The World Health Organization (WHO) outlined that adults require at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week to maintain optimal health.

If the trend continues, levels of inactivity are projected to further rise to 35% by 2030, and the world is currently off track from meeting the global target to reduce physical inactivity by 2030. The WHO recommends that adults undertake 150 minutes of moderate-intensity, or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity, or equivalent, per week. Physical inactivity puts adults at greater risk of cardiovascular diseases such as heart attacks and strokes, type 2 diabetes, dementia and cancers such as breast and colon.

“These findings highlight a lost opportunity to reduce cancer and heart disease, and improve mental health and well-being through increased physical activity,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “We must renew our commitment to increasing levels of physical activity and prioritizing bold action, including strengthened policies and increased funding, to reverse this worrying trend.”

The highest rates of physical inactivity were observed in the high-income Asia Pacific region (48%) and South Asia (45%), with levels of inactivity in other regions ranging from 28% in high-income Western countries to 14% in Oceania.

Physical inactivity is still more common among women globally compared with men, with inactivity rates of 34% compared to 29%. In some countries, this difference is as much as 20 percentage points. Additionally, people over 60 are less active than other adults, underscoring the importance of promoting physical activity for older adults. “Physical inactivity is a silent threat to global health, contributing significantly to the burden of chronic diseases,” said Dr Rüdiger Krech, Director of Health Promotion at WHO. “We need to find innovative ways to motivate people to be more active, considering factors like age, environment, and cultural background. By making physical activity accessible, affordable, and enjoyable for all, we can significantly reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases and create a population that is healthier and more productive.”

“Promoting physical activity requires a whole-of-society approach and creating environments that make it easier and safer for everyone to be more active in ways they enjoy to reap the many health benefits of regular physical activity,” said Dr Fiona Bull, Head of the WHO Unit for Physical Activity.

The societal and economic cost of inaction will lead to millions of new preventable, non-communicable diseases.

Despite the worrying results, there are some signs of improvement in some countries. The study showed that almost half of the world’s countries have made some improvements over the past decade, and 22 countries were identified as likely to reach the global target of reducing inactivity by 15% by 2030, if their trend continues at the same pace.

In light of these findings, WHO is calling on countries to strengthen their policy implementation to promote and enable physical activity through grassroots and community sport and active recreation and transport (walking, cycling and use of public transport), among other measures.

“These new findings highlight a lost opportunity to reduce cancer and heart disease, and improve mental health and well-being through increased physical activity,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “We must renew our commitment to increasing levels of physical activity and prioritizing bold action, including strengthened policies and increased funding, to reverse this worrying trend.”

Collective efforts based on partnerships between government and non-governmental stakeholders and increased investments in innovative approaches will be needed to reach the least active people and to reduce inequalities in access to measures promoting and improving physical activity.

## Movement 26.2 – an NHS Initiative in the UK

The NHS is set to launch a new scheme in January 2027, called Movement 26.2, which will incentivise Britons to walk for at least 20 minutes a day.

Participants will earn shopping vouchers and discounts from high street and online retailers by logging their daily walks online, via phone, or smartwatch, with the aim of completing the equivalent of a marathon (26 miles) each month.

The initiative was developed by NHS England alongside Olympic medallist Sir Brendan Foster (founder of the Great North Run) and Sir Keith Mills (creator of the Air Miles scheme). NHS chief executive Sir Jim Mackey said the scheme aims to make physical activity a daily choice, improving both physical and mental health.

**Movement 26.2** encourages participants to walk about 20-30 minutes daily to hit a 26.2-mile monthly target, which can be tracked using a smartwatch, phone, or other online platform. Successfully completing the challenge earns the participant digital badges, shopping vouchers, and retail discounts.

It is free to join, and the rewards are funded via corporate partnerships rather than NHS budgets. The programme is designed to tackle physical inactivity, which costs the NHS billions annually, by 'gamifying' exercise and building sustainable daily habits.

## Conclusion

A program that uses current, almost universal, digital technologies usually carried 'on person' each day has both the means and the availability to counteract both physical inactivity and obesity. It will also have benefits on mental health and personal empowerment.

A program that involves no personal cost (such as gym membership) and which provides financial incentives to participants is an excellent way to reach all members of society and provides a good model for many countries to adapt to their own situations and needs.

Further, being in partnership with commercial and philanthropic interest groups it lessens the financial burden on National Health Services.

"Promoting physical activity goes beyond promoting individual lifestyle choice - it will require a whole-of-society approach and creating environments that make it easier and safer for everyone to be more active in ways they enjoy, to reap the many health benefits of regular physical activity," said Dr Fiona Bull, Head of the WHO Unit for Physical Activity.

Physical inactivity is associated with one in six deaths, according to NHS England. A person is classified as physically inactive if they do less than 30 minutes of moderate-intensity equivalent physical activity per week. A survey by Sport England showed that in the year to November 2025 nearly a quarter of adults, or around 12 million people, were in that category.

The NHS is covering the initial set up, but the wider plan is to draw in philanthropic backing from major corporates as the scheme rolls out.

"If someone walks 30 minutes five times a week, they could gain up to four extra years of healthy life," he says. Health officials say the NHS will not be paying for the rewards. They say the NHS in England will be in partnership with other organisations from the public and private sectors who will run the scheme.

GPs and other health staff will be encouraged to promote the initiative among their patients.

The initiative is to encourage citizens to increase their fitness levels through walking 30 minutes a day / 26 miles a month and it does not relate to just walking. If a smart phone or other appropriate device is worn or carried each day, normal activity of work/leisure will also be logged.

Citizens are encouraged to meet the monthly requirements through earning vouchers and discounts from 'local' or national businesses.

Movement 26.2 commences January 2027 and the scheme has generated interest among various sectors of the population. If found to be successful in increasing fitness and activity among the population it can both advantage the individual participant and the National health services through decreased health spending related to diseases of obesity and sedentary lifestyles as well as improving population mental health.

Hopefully other countries will keep a watch on this and similar systems, as national models for their own populations. Most people worldwide will have a smart phone or similar device. Using it for such a purpose counteracts the sedentary influences of the same technologies.

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