



PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

As a follow-up to the first issue on physical activity, Nyam News continues this series by showing how physical activity can be promoted. First, a historical perspective. In addition to healthy eating, scientists and physicians of many ancient cultures recognized the role of physical activity in promoting the health of mind and body. In China and India, concepts of health and disease prevention were developed as early as 3000 B.C. and both cultures upheld philosophies that emphasized the importance of exercise in preserving good health. This recognition of the relationship between medicine and physical activity is reflected in the writings of Greek physicians such as Herodotus (480BC), Hippocrates (377 BC) and Galen (129 AD). Today, educators, philosophers, scientists and physicians still

believe that physical activity is one of the most significant contributors to health and longevity.

Physical activity should be promoted at the individual, community and national level to address the issue of our modern sedentary lifestyle and its negative effect on health. The public should become familiar with what being physically active involves; different types of physical activity and their benefits; appropriate activities for people of all different ages; the risks of physical activities; and how to avoid injury.

Educating individuals about physical activity can be done in either a formal setting such as in schools or at community meetings. Additionally, the general public can be reached through public education materials such as posters, flyers and brochures or through the mass media (television, radios, newspapers etc).

Fitness clubs and gyms have gained great popularity in the past few years. They offer classes in aerobics, yoga and dance, among other types of activities. Most clubs boast a variety of machines so that members can focus on specific muscle groups or any individual areas of weakness. One essential component of any club is the availability of trained instructors who can give proper guidance to individuals who are new to the world of structured exercise, particularly sedentary persons, so that they can avoid injury. Fitness clubs play an important role for those who are not interested in exercising out in the open air, as well as those who have neither the facilities nor the motivation to exercise on their own at home. However, there are individuals who do not enjoy exercising within the confines of a gym and would welcome the establishment of

more parks and such safe areas for jogging and sports.

Many people complain that repetitive activities like jogging around a track or on a treadmill, or resistance training are too boring. The promotion of competitive sports such as netball, football, volleyball, and cricket among different communities may be the way to ensure that physical activity can be seen as a leisure time activity rather than a chore. A park and/or sports complex in each major community can provide a venue for these activities.

For those not inspired by sports, physical activity can become a part of everyday life in a variety of ways. Some of the ways in which physical activity can fit into home, school and work include:

- Taking a walk once per day, perhaps walking to work if possible.
- Taking the stairs instead of the elevator at the office.
- Spending less time in front of the television or computer.
- Playing actively with your children and encouraging them to engage in play.
- Walking, jogging or cycling instead of taking the car on short errands.

The integration of physical activity into everyday life should be stressed in schools. Children are becoming less and less active, and spend increasing periods of time being entertained by their

television sets, video games and computers. This new lifestyle is having an impact on the health of the younger generation - obesity is on the rise. In order to counter this effect, physical activity should be a mandatory part of the school curriculum. Similarly, physical activity levels have declined at the workplace over the years; we have machines to do a number of tasks that used to require as least some degree of physical exertion in the past. In the Caribbean, many companies and organisations encourage their employees to participate in sports competitions, and many have established gyms and sports clubs specifically for the use of their staff members.

There are a number of psychological barriers to physical activity, including perception of body image, lack of confidence and the absence of immediate rewards. These barriers are often seen in individuals who are overweight or obese, and are real factors to be tackled if levels of physical activity are to be improved. Exercise should be promoted to the extent that persons with negative psychological barriers can feel comfortable with physical activity and be encouraged to include it in their daily lives. Obese people may need to be reassured that while they cannot become fit and athletic overnight, there are ways to achieve their goals by taking "baby steps" – such as exercising moderately in short sessions. Overweight exercisers often prefer

to start their programs in private until they have shed a few pounds and begun to feel more confident about physical activity.

A wide range of simple physical activities should be promoted to cater to people who are sedentary or overweight or who have difficulty with physical activity because of health complications. Individuals should be allowed to feel comfortable with their level of activity before moving on to the next step. Walking, for example, is a simple activity which should be promoted as a natural, healthy and safe form of exercise. Over time, individuals can increase walking speed, or even begin to jog, as well as increase the amount of time spent on this activity.

In the promotion of any exercise program, everyone should be encouraged to set goals that are achievable. For example, an obese person may set goals as to how many pounds they wish to lose in a given time frame, but this time frame should be realistic. Therefore, it is useful to know how to measure the number of calories that can be burnt by doing specific physical activities, and therefore, the time within which the weight-loss goal can realistically be achieved. It is also important to educate the individual about the types of activities that are most suitable to target specific health related problems as well as for specific age groups. The next set of issues of **NyamNews** will show the benefit of physical activity for various diseases.