

LEISURE

Walk to the millennium

Only one-third of Canadians aged 25 to 55 meet minimum standards of staying healthy, survey indicates

BY FRED SIMPSON
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Walk, don't drive, to the nearest millennium.

That seems to be the mainstream message being beamed at the general populace by gurus of the fitness world these early months of 1999.

"Only a third of Canadians aged 25 to 55 meet the minimum standards of staying healthy," reports Canada's Physical Activity Guide survey.

It found only 38 per cent of Canadians aged 25 to 34 get enough exercise, while only 29 per cent of 45 to 55 year olds are fit.

There is good news.

The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Institute reports 15 per cent of Canadians met the guidelines in 1981 when it began monitoring fitness.

That has increased by about 1 per cent every year.

There are other optimists.

Municipal recreation director Darlene Joslin thinks "younger adults are more fitness and health conscious in all age groups".

York Region-area chiropractor Ron Nusbaum also throws some kudos in the direction of the baby boomer generation.

"I've found that baby boomers are typically in better shape than people 10 years younger. They are more aware of the importance of physical fitness."

Proof, he said, can be seen in the number of adults in their 30s or 40s who go to fitness clubs.

"Look at all the fitness clubs that are around," he said.

The government's latest commentary on Canadian fitness, or lack thereof, is remorseless.

It takes very few prisoners.

It notes even young people should be getting more exercise than the guideline sets, but 61 per cent of teenagers are only somewhat active, as are 45 per cent of five to 12 year olds.

Ontario Participation director Art Salmon observes that young people have



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Exercise and wellness is catching on more and more with adults 55 or older, including seniors at the McConaghy Centre, who take part in the line dancing program.

more non-physical distractions these days.

"When we were kids, we didn't have computer games and 25 channels," he said. "They can always find some non-physical alternatives."

The federal government hopes its physical activity guide, which was released last October, will become as popular as the Canada Food Guide.

It explains how much and how often Canadians need to exercise to stay healthy.

That can be 60 minutes a day of any kind of light activity, 30 minutes of moderately intense or 20 minutes of vigorous activity four days a week.

Above all, do some walking.

The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Institute, which monitors Canadian fitness, is also concerned about the lifestyles of the elderly.

Only one-third of older men and women, it says, report any physical activity even twice a week, putting them at greater risk of losing mobility and functional capacity.

It warns if the current level of activity is simply maintained or gets worse, the future

costs of health care will spiral out of control.

"The baby boomers (those born between 1947 and 1966) are very conscious of health and wellness and therefore their children are being more active," Joslin said.

She is also chairperson of the National Benefits of Recreation committee for the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association.

Older adults, she said, are getting into the health kick, as well.

Passive Exercise

"I'm also seeing a huge trend in the older adults," she said. "Those 55 years and older are into wellness as they never have been before."

She explained "passive exercise" is catching on more and more.

"Heath people are saying that walking is one of the best activities that you can do. I've noticed there are a lot more people out there walking, so we are planning our parks department with that in mind," she pointed out.

"Maintaining a routine of walking as

little as five kilometres per week, climbing three flights of stairs daily, doing sports of moderate intensity, is sufficient to receive protection."

People are becoming more active because, in the long run, they feel better about themselves, Joslin said.

York Region Health Services epidemiologist Dean Middleton agreed even deciding to go for a walk every day would be beneficial.

"Health gurus are kind of backing off on this 'get to the health club and do high-impact aerobics'," he said.

"They are going back to just 15-minute walks. Even at your work, you should try to get up from your desk."

Middleton, who has compiled a health status report, said the health of residents in York Region is generally better than in other parts of Ontario.

"In an area where the general economic status is so high, there tends to be healthier people."

But he also casts a somewhat jaundiced eye at the youth of the nation.

Obesity is the culprit.

"In the past 15 years, the prevalence of obesity has increased by more than 50 per cent in Canadian children aged six to 11 and by 40 per cent in those 12 years to 17," Middleton said.

He also cited a 1991 Gallup poll that reported only 12 per cent of schools provided daily physical education for all their students.

Nusbaum said one of the problems adults face is finding the time to exercise.

"As we get older and take on a family and the responsibilities that go with it, there is less time to go round," he noted.

"There is that segment of people that becomes more sedentary."

He cited one of his patients, who was spending too much time watching television and at her computer.

"She had very little left over for adopting a healthy lifestyle," he said.

"She agreed that, instead of spending two to three hours on the computer, she would limit it to 15 minutes at a time and still get her work done," he said.

"Unless something is absolutely required, we shouldn't let it take us completely away from a more healthy, productive way to spend your time."

Nusbaum stressed that health is a total package.

"We would be very shortsighted to say that the determinants of health include

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