

Majority of Canadians view physical inactivity as a serious public health issue

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Guy Faulkner, Canadian Institutes of Health Research-Public Health Agency of Canada (CIHR-PHAC) Chair in Applied Public Health and professor in UBC's School of Kinesiology, was senior author on the study. Credit: UBC Media Relations

Physical inactivity is nearly on par with unhealthy diets and tobacco use as a public health concern among Canadians, a new UBC study has found.

Approximately 55 per cent of respondents in a [national survey](#) of 2,519 people rated physical inactivity as a serious public [health](#) concern, compared with 58 per cent for unhealthy diets and 57 per cent for tobacco use.

The study was the first known effort to examine what the researchers call the "social [climate](#)"—society's feelings, attitudes, beliefs and opinions—surrounding physical inactivity in Canada.

"In considering physical inactivity in Canada, statements are often made about how important it is for being active to become the Canadian norm, rather than the exception. Yet, the social climate has never been measured," said Guy Faulkner, UBC kinesiology professor and senior author of the paper published this week in *BMC Public Health*. "Our starting point was, 'How would we know if the norm ever changes, if we don't assess it?'"

The social climate surrounding any public health issue is important, because it signals how receptive the public would be to policies meant to address it.

The UBC study asked participants where responsibility lies for solving the physical inactivity problem. Only 21 per cent saw it as something individuals must deal with on their own. About two-thirds said it is both a private and a public health matter.

"Many recognize the importance of thinking beyond the individual, so we have an interesting platform for considering innovative policies at the national, provincial and territorial levels," Faulkner said.

Faulkner noted how the social climate around smoking changed over the years. While some of that change could be attributed to government interventions, it's also true that the change allowed government interventions to become more intrusive.

"Taking legislative action—for example, banning smoking in bars—became more acceptable when there were appropriate levels of public support to move forward with those types of actions," Faulkner said.

Physical inactivity is well known to contribute to health problems, yet its prevalence continues to grow. Barely two out of 10 adults in Canada, and one in 10 children, is meeting current guidelines for physical activity.

Earlier this year, the World Health Organization published its global action plan for physical activity, which calls for a 10-per-cent reduction in global [physical inactivity](#) between now and 2025. Canada also released its own national policy on physical activity.

Those documents lay the foundation for governments, organizations and communities to develop policies that will get their populations moving.

"The social climate is not going to change overnight. It's something that will take time for interventions to occur, and for changes in the environment to happen," Faulkner said.

Now that the UBC study has established a benchmark, researchers would like to see the survey conducted again in 2025 to see whether the social climate in Canada has changed.

More information: Lira Yun et al, Assessing the social climate of physical (in)activity in Canada, *BMC Public Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-018-6166-2](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6166-2)

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