Sedentary behaviour on the rise across Europe

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The number of European adults spending more than four-and-a-half hours sitting per day increased by 8% between 2002 and 2017, according to research published in the open access journal *BMC Public Health*.

A team of researchers at King Juan Carlos University, Spain, used survey data from 96,004 adults across the European Union (EU) to study changes in sedentary behavior levels. The researchers found that in 2002 the percentage of adults that were sedentary for more than four-and-a-half hours per day was 49.3%, but in 2017 was 54.3%. Between 2002 and 2017 the proportion of sedentary adults increased by 3.9% in Spain, 7.4% in Germany, 17.8% in France and 22.5% in Great Britain.

Xián Mayo Mauriz, the corresponding author said: "Sitting for more than four-and-a-half hours per day is associated with an increased risk of suffering from illnesses such as heart disease. Our research indicates that the prevalence of sedentary behavior has increased across Europe and this could have significant implications for the health of all European states."

To examine sedentary behavior in adults, the authors analyzed data collected in 2002, 2005, 2013 and 2017 as part of four separate Sport and Physical Activity EU Special Eurobarometer surveys. During the surveys, participants completed a questionnaire assessing how many hours on an average day they spent doing physical activity or sitting. Participants were 50 years old on average.

The authors found that similar proportions of young and older adults were sedentary over the entire study period, although on average the proportion of sedentary adults was slightly higher among young people. From 2002 to 2017 55.6% of those aged 65 and over and 58.3% of those aged 18-24 were found to be physically inactive. The age group with the largest increase in physical inactivity by 2017 was that of those aged 35-44, with a 15.3% increase in the number of adults sitting for more than four and a half hours per day from 43.7% to 50.4%.

Gender was also shown to sedentary behavior levels, with 52.2% of men across Europe sitting for more than four-and-a-half hours per day

compared to 49.5% of women. Between 2002 and 2017 the prevalence of sedentary behavior in Great Britain increased by 25.2% for men and 16.5% for women, while in Germany the prevalence increased by 15.6% for men but decreased by 1.2% for women.

Xián Mayo Mauriz said: "We propose that the observed increase in the prevalence of physical inactivity could be attributed to people increasingly interacting with technology such as smartphones and streaming services during work and leisure time. Our findings suggest that in addition to encouraging physical activity, governments should focus on reducing the amount of time people spend sitting per day."

The authors caution that as the amount of time spent sitting was determined by participants describing a typical day, this study may underestimate the true prevalence of sedentary behavior across Europe. Further research could incorporate data from smartphone data to provide more accurate estimates of sedentary behavior.

More information: "Changes in sedentary behavior in European Union adults between 2002 and 2017" *BMC Public Health* 2020 DOI: 10.1186/s12889-020-09293-1

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