

Major life events influence level of physical activity, may negatively impact heart health

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Starting a new school or a new job, having a baby or entering retirement are major life events that significantly affect a person's physical activity level, which may lead to poorer heart health. Individuals and health care

professionals need to be proactive in addressing this issue, according to guidance from a new American Heart Association Scientific Statement published today in the Association's flagship journal *Circulation*. A scientific statement is an expert analysis of current research and may inform future guidelines.

The statement, entitled "Supporting Physical Activity in Patients and Populations During Life Events and Transitions," focuses on the need to better understand how life changes affect [physical activity](#) levels and what can be done to help people maintain good heart health throughout life transitions. The statement writing group members note that because sedentary behavior is an emerging cardiovascular disease risk factor, it's important to recognize how physical activity levels may impact health during major life events and transitions. The statement also provides guidance for health care professionals to identify, address and promote regular physical activity to patients experiencing significant changes in their lives. Options for community-level interventions to promote physical activity are also explored.

"Certain life events and transitions may mark the beginning and end of different phases of a person's life, and these life changes may lead to periods of less physical activity and more sedentary lifestyle behaviors. Physical activity is an important heart-healthy behavior and too much sitting and inactivity is not good for you," said the writing group Chair Abbi D. Lane-Cordova, Ph.D., FAHA, an assistant professor in exercise science at the Arnold School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina in Columbia South Carolina. "This is a particularly important topic right now because, in addition to life's other major events, the COVID-19 pandemic is another disruption of everyone's daily routines and activity levels."

The American Heart Association recommends most adults participate in at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or

75 minutes per week of vigorous aerobic activity, or a combination of both, preferably spread throughout the week. Children and adolescents 6-17 years old should get at least 60 minutes of moderate-to vigorous-intensity physical activity every day.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion "Healthy People 2020" initiative, only 1 in 5 teens (20%) and about 1 in 4 adults (24%) in the U.S. routinely achieved the recommended levels of physical activity in recent years. While these rates are low across the board, data suggest these numbers could change significantly during a major life event or transition. The writing group examined data on 17 different life events or transitions, and found evidence of decreased activity levels during nine events:

- Beginning a new school (elementary, middle, high school or college) – each distinct life events;
- a first job or career change;
- a marriage or civil union;
- pregnancy;
- parenting;
- retirement; or
- moving into a long-term care facility.

The writing group also assessed the effects of major life changes on various subgroups within the U.S. population to identify people most in need of support during life transitions. People most at risk for significantly lower physical activity during life changes include:

- individuals with lower levels of education;
- those who lived alone during the initial COVID-19 venue closings;
- those who lacked safe access to outdoor space for exercise and

- physical activity; and
- women during pregnancy and parenthood.

The "socioecological model," which encompasses individual, social, environmental and policy contributors, was the framework used to examine numerous factors that affected levels of physical activity.

The analysis found that general factors affecting physical activity levels among youth (

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