

Universal access to physical activity could save billions in health costs

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A little more than half of family health teams in Ontario offer physical activity services such as classes or counselling to encourage exercise among patients, and new research finds that standardizing access could help reduce the \$6.8-billion cost associated with a sedentary lifestyle.

There is a link between a lack of [physical activity](#) and chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity.

A study from the University of Waterloo and published in *Applied Physiology, Nutrition and Metabolism* last week reveals that only 57 per cent of family [health](#) teams in Ontario offer physical activity services, and the majority of these services are restricted to people with specific conditions. Researchers looked at the physical activity services offered in 102 locations in Ontario.

"These services can range from something as informal as an organized walking group, to something as structured as an aerobics class or counselling session," said Cameron Moore, lead author on the paper and a graduate student at Waterloo at the time of the study. "Physical activity services are certainly part of the broader health promotion picture, but they are unique in their cost-effectiveness and ability to improve health and well-being for all patients, not just those with a chronic condition."

Currently, 67 [family health](#) teams in Ontario receive funding for health-promotion initiatives, including dedicated funds to employ health promotion staff. Prior research shows that adding a physical activity counsellor would cost approximately \$91.43 per participant per month.

"There may be an important role for physical activity counsellors as Ontario shifts towards interdisciplinary health-care models," said Professor Lora Giangregorio, of the Faculty of

Applied Health Sciences at Waterloo and senior author of the study. "They have the potential to influence behaviour change and monitor adherence to exercise programs, resulting in better outcomes for the patient."

In family health teams, a group of salaried physicians and health-care practitioners work together under the same roof and with the same patients. Physicians can draw upon the expertise of other practitioners, including dietitians, social workers and health promoters. They share information and can refer patients to a range of specialists who are familiar with their medical history.

"Family health teams operate within a synergistic model of health care, and physical activity counsellors are an important addition to that mix," said Moore. "Most people receive health care through the primary care system, and therefore it is a great place to initiate conversations about the health benefits of being physically active, and to offer services that promote physical activity."

The study suggests that registered kinesiologists with expertise in physical activity prescription and counseling for behaviour change are well suited for [health promotion](#) roles. In Ontario, kinesiology is a newly accredited professional designation with a scope of practice that includes [physical activity promotion](#) and prescription.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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