

# The Research File



Summary from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute and ParticipACTION

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## Health Benefits of Sport Participation



Rising rates of pediatric obesity and associated diseases among children and youth in Canada and the United States is a significant public health concern. While poor nutrition may partially explain

this growing trend, perhaps equally as important is the lack of regular activity among this group. A recent study which examined physical activity levels of children and youth found that a mere 7% (9% of boys and 4% of girls) of Canadian children and youth achieve recommended levels of activity, despite the known benefits of regular activity.<sup>1</sup>

Activity levels have been shown to be lower among certain sub-groups, for example among girls (compared to boys) and older children/teens (compared to younger). Given these findings, there is a definite need to engage children and youth in physical activity. Increasing physical activity opportunities at school (for example, through the provision of more opportunities for participation in sport) has been proposed as a possible way to improve rates among children and youth<sup>2</sup>, particularly given that children and youth spend most of their waking hours at school. Aside from of weight control, other proposed benefits of sport participation include improved self-esteem, social and problem solving skills, academic achievement, and school attendance.<sup>2</sup> Sport participation may also reduce the number of juvenile arrests, teen births and school drop-out rates.<sup>2</sup> In a recent study Taliaferro and colleagues analyzed data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behaviour Surveys to examine the relationships (by year and demographic characteristics) between sport participation and various health risk behaviours among high school students. Their findings suggest that overall male and younger students



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were more likely than female and older students respectively to report participation in sport.

### Physical Activity and dietary habits

According to Taliaferro et al., male athletes were more likely than their non-athlete counterparts to engage in higher levels of vigorous activity and consume fruits and vegetables. Conversely, male athletes were less likely than non-athletes to report trying to lose weight, but were more likely to report using laxatives or pills and vomiting. For the most part, female athletes were less likely than non-athletes to report trying to lose weight. Ethnic differences, however, were noted with respect to food consumption; with Caucasian female athletes being more likely than non-athletes to consume fruit and vegetables (this relationship varied by year).

### Health risk behaviors

Taliaferro and colleagues also examined the relationship between risky sexual behaviors and sport participation. Their findings suggest that for the most part sport participation was related to more positive behaviors and reduced negative behaviors, although fewer positive

behaviors were apparent among certain ethnic groups. Specifically, the authors found that use of protection (e.g.: condoms) was more prevalent among male and female athletes compared to non-athletes. Female athletes were less likely to report having intercourse or multiple sexual partners in the three months prior to the study. Ethnic differences were also noted; Caucasian female athletes were less likely to report ever engaging in sexual intercourse, while male athletes of Hispanic or 'other' origin were more likely to report having sexual intercourse in the past three months. In addition to this, Taliaferro et al found differences between athletes and non-athletes in the prevalence of substance abuse and inter/intra-personal violence. Specifically, they found that male athletes (across ethnicities) were less likely than non-athletes to report carrying a weapon, and to consider attempting suicide. Similarly, female athletes were also less likely than non-athletes to report carrying a weapon. Moreover, Hispanic (male) athletes were more likely to report being hit by a partner, to be involved in a physical altercation, and one resulting in injury. Caucasian female athletes were less likely than non-athletes to report having a fight or feeling unsafe at school, considering or attempting suicide and being forced into sexual intercourse. The authors also explored substance abuse and found that male athletes (across all years and ethnicities) were more likely to use alcohol and chewing tobacco but were less likely to smoke cigarettes. Marijuana and cocaine use was less prevalent among Caucasian male athletes compared to non-athletes. Caucasian female athletes were also less likely to smoke cigarettes and use marijuana; they were also less likely use cocaine or steroids and other illegal drugs (these relationships varied across time).

### More info...

- 1 Colley et al. (2011). Physical activity and Canadian children and youth: Accelerometer results from the 2007 to 2009 Canadian Health Measures Survey. Statistics Canada, Health Reports. Vol. 22(1).
- 2 Taliaferro, L., Rienzo, B., Donovan, K. (2010). Relationships Between Youth Sport Participation and Selected Health Risk Behaviors from 1999 to 2007. Journal of School Health. Vol. 80(8):399-40.

## What have we learned?

- Physical activity rates among children and youth are low, and few achieve recommended levels of daily activity despite known benefits.
- Increasing opportunities for sport participation during school hours may be a way to increase activity levels among students.
- Sport participation offers many benefits beyond weight control, such as positive interpersonal and social skills.
- Sport participation has the potential to promote more positive healthy behaviours and fewer negative behaviours.

