YOUTH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AS AN OUT-OF-CLASS OCCUPATION

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Abstract
Introduction. Every year, the lack of physical activity causes the death of 600,000 people in Europe; lack of exercise also leads to overweight and obesity in more than one million people [1]. The study of the Latvian Public Health Agency (PHA) concerning students’ health habits shows that the proportion of students whose general physical activity level could be considered as sufficient is only 46.3% [2]. In several countries, different programmes are designed to facilitate school students’ physical activity, and beneficial out-of-class occupation is emphasised, recommending physical activities on the way to school and coming back home. Material and methods. Sixty-five students (grade 10 of secondary school located in a town) aged 15 to 18 participated in the survey. Results. Only 5% of the students questioned used a bicycle as a means of going to and from school during the previous four months. In the inquiry, students mentioned that if they were given the possibility to choose the mode of travel between school and home, then 36% would choose a bicycle, 13% would go on foot, and 48% would go by car. Conclusions. In Latvia, riding a bike has a seasonal character, and during the school year, it is possible to cycle from home to school in spring and autumn. Having analysed the students’ answers, we concluded that most often, the students from the region in question preferred to ride a bike in spring. There was a large difference between the number of students who would like to use a bicycle and the number of students who actually used it.

Key words: physical activity, mode of travel, cycling, habit

Introduction

A child begins to become an adherent of a sedentary lifestyle from an early age, when it learns to play computer games before it knows how to read or count. The sedentary lifestyle is maintained at home and at school. Thus, a serious life-long threat to the child’s health is developed [3]. People should exercise regularly, and exercise should be a part of one’s everyday life (getting dressed, climbing stairs, or walking). In addition to the above so-called simple actions, people also engage in intentional activities, which are planned and carried out in one’s leisure time [4].

The effect of different sports and physical activities on the body is varied. Physical activities or exercises have a general toning effect as well as an activating effect on the metabolism of tissues. Physical activity has a beneficial impact on all body systems, normalising their functioning. The contraction ability of the heart muscle and the heart minute volume increase, the blood circulation in the whole body becomes better, and the tone and elasticity of the blood vessels increase. There are beneficial changes in blood composition. Physical activity stabilises the nervous system. Rapid exhaustion, sleeplessness, and irritation gradually decrease. Movement coordination, balance, and reaction time improve. Physical and mental work capacity gradually increases [5]. The above emphasises the fact that physical activity has a primary role in maintaining and improving one’s health.

Physical activity is an essential precondition for keeping good health at any age, especially in childhood and the teenage years. The leading role of exercise in human development and keeping a healthy lifestyle was proven already long ago. It is seen both in a child’s growth and development in different age periods and in an adult’s life [5]. According to the data from the study about the health facilitating habits of Latvia’s inhabitants, in 2006, only 27.2% of teenagers and youth aged 15-24 years exercised at least for half an hour, two or three times a week. The development of modern technologies has created new ways of spending one’s leisure time, which do not facilitate the choice of a healthy lifestyle. For example, on average 1/3 of schoolchildren watch TV for four or more hours a day, but on weekends, this number rises to almost 1/2 [2].

The lack of physical activity in society is a problem not only in Latvia but also all over the world. Each year there are about 1.9 million deaths due to insufficient physical activity. The physical activity of more than 60% of the world’s inhabitants does not correspond with WHO recommendations for the physical activity needed to maintain one’s health. In the USA, one in ten people die due to insufficient physical activity that leads to different diseases, such as coronary heart disease; type 2 diabetes; and breast, colon, or rectal cancer [6].

Both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Science in Latvia implement programmes aimed at promoting sports activities for children and youth. However, more purposeful coordination among the institutions is necessary in order to realise more rationally and effectively the available means of popularising and implementing physical activity. This conclusion was reached in a meeting, which, following the invitation of the Public Health Agency (PHA), was attended by the representatives of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as the representatives of the Sports Medicine State Agency. In Latvia, several studies have been carried out in the fields of physical activity and school children’s habits. A school student health habit study by the PHA showed that the proportion of students whose level of general