

DECLINING FITNESS LEVELS ARE A CHALLENGE TO WELL-BEING IN FINLAND

– effective actions to increase physical activity and reverse the downward spiral of fitness

The fitness levels of Finns are declining. The physical fitness of conscripts has gradually deteriorated from the late 1970s to the present day. One third of conscripts are now in poor physical condition, which is an eightfold increase. Their average weight has increased by eight kilograms. On average, the physical fitness further deteriorates by about a quarter by the end of their career. A baseline forecast suggests that this decline will continue in the coming years. This trend is a challenge for the well-being in Finland. In this policy brief, we propose actions at the national and local level that, if implemented simultaneously, can halt the decline in physical fitness and reverse the downward trend.

In an article in the *Futura* journal, we presented a forecast for the decline in the fitness levels of Finns of working age in the coming decades. While in 2021, around 53% of 50-year-old men were at least at the minimum level of "working-age physical fitness", the forecast model shows that in 2040, only 27% of 50-year-old men will reach even this minimum level. Similarly, around 7% of 50-year-olds are currently in the 'good physical fitness' needed for physically demanding jobs, but in 2040, this will be just over 1%.

The decline in physical fitness among Finns that has continued for decades presents a challenge for Finland. If this decline in fitness cannot be stopped, physically demanding jobs will face even greater labour shortages than other jobs. In addition to labour shortages and loss of labour productivity, this trend will also have a significant impact on the morbidity, work capacity, disability pensions, and probably also the mortality of Finns. The before-mentioned factors will lead to the breaking of Finland's economic backbone and to challenges for the defence and for other sectors of society.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION-MAKERS AT THE LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL

1. Actions to promote physical activity should be led in a cross-governmental and long-term manner at both the national and the local level.
2. Developing the urban fabric in such a way that it genuinely encourages people of all ages to active mobility in their everyday lives.
3. More effective financial incentives and instruments are needed to increase physical activity.
4. Primary and secondary schools should provide a wide range of support for their pupils' physically active lifestyles.
5. Including a course on lifelong functional capacity in every university degree.
6. Involving the health sector more strongly in the implementation of lifestyle counselling and providing tools for guidance.
7. Creating a new, more user-oriented model for leisure activities.
8. Working with municipalities, employers, NGOs, and homes to create a new active way of everyday working and living.



LEADING THE ACTIONS TO PROMOTE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The cross-sectoral actions to promote physical activity must be led with determination and persistence, at the national and local level. The numerous physical activity projects and programmes implemented in the past have shown that the phenomenon of physical inactivity cannot be tackled by isolated, single-sector measures. The measures promoting physical activity therefore need to be led on a cross-sectoral basis. At the national level, the natural "home base" for the management and coordination of these measures is the Prime Minister's Office, and, at the local level, the municipal or city management group. At the regional level, the management of the wellbeing services county must also enable increased physical activity through its decisions. The third sector and the private sector also need to be involved. The most effective measures to increase physical activity are created in joint action by different sectors and actors.



AIMING FOR A "MUSCLE-POWERED" MOBILITY IN CITIES



Spatial planning must take into account equal opportunities for everyday physical activity in people's daily living environment. The urban structure must be developed so that travelling by muscle power is the easiest and most effortless option in as much of the urban area as possible. A functionally compact and pleasant urban environment encourages people to walk and cycle when making shorter trips to shops, school, and work. When walking or cycling to the stops is pleasant and safe, public transport can also provide opportunities for active travel. An car-dominating environment is challenging for pedestrians and cyclists, as distances are long and connections fragmented. When urban areas are made more compact, green spaces must be cared for, as they have a significant impact on the everyday physical activity for people of all ages. Neighbourhood woods and smaller green spaces are important for children in play, while larger green spaces with tracks and adjacent recreational facilities provide a popular exercise setting for adults.



ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS TO PROMOTE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

More effective economic incentives and instruments are needed to increase physical activity. At the national level, financial incentives should be developed to motivate people to make healthier choices. New ways of financially supporting the costs of active hobbies for children and young people need to be introduced. The reduced VAT rate should be extended to a wider range of health promotion services, such as lifestyle and physical activity counselling for individuals. Further incentives for purchasing electric bicycles are needed, if we wish to replace more car trips with bicycle trips. At the municipal level, one way of increasing physical activity is to distribute exercise vouchers to the local residents. Municipalities can also take part in the creation of new revenue-generating models with companies providing sports services, for example, by adding quality criteria promoting physical activity to calls for tenders for contracts regarding construction project works, and by setting design rules for bicycle parking in town planning. Impact assessments of physical activity should be carried out in planning and decision-making in accordance with the guidelines.



PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL DAY AND DISTRIBUTION OF LESSON HOURS



Primary and secondary schools should provide a wide range of support for their students' physically active lifestyles. In primary education, the school days can be made more active by promoting local schools within walking and cycling distance. Schools should favour pupils going outside for recess. The outdoor school facilities need to inspire more physical activity. During the lessons, physical activity can be increased by regularly using teaching methods that promote learning and are physically activating, as well as through the use of the outdoor spaces of the school and nearby green spaces. The curriculum design for physical and health education should be developed in a direction that encourages an active lifestyle and promotes the well-being of the students. At its best, physical education can introduce children to different sports and create an interest in a new sporting activity. Physical education can support a positive, active self-image for each student by helping them to identify their personal strengths and find physical activities that they enjoy. Physical education can help create a sense of achievement and build a positive self-image even for children who rarely experience it in the academic subjects.





HIGHER EDUCATION PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Every university degree and further education course, regardless of the field of study, should include a course on lifelong physical activity and functional capacity. The aim of the course would be to provide the basics of the biological changes in our functional capacity, and to teach practical ways to strengthen our personal functional capacity at different ages. In addition, at least all health education, physical education, and education degrees should include online courses on lifestyle interventions and the basics of lifestyle counselling. Similar courses should be included in the further and continuing education in these fields. Every healthcare and physical activity professional should at least have the tools for lifestyle interventions, as these are critical for disease prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation.

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THOUSANDS OF HEALTHCARE ENCOUNTERS PUT TO GOOD USE

Thousands of Finns meet with healthcare professionals every day. These encounters are a natural and effective place to address physical inactivity and other lifestyle issues (mini-intervention). In the same way, effective models for and pathways to physical activity counselling and other lifestyle counselling should be built across the health sector (from specialised to primary health care and from occupational health to student health services). The mapping of physical activity and other lifestyle patterns should be carried out systematically in health care, using validated questionnaires and a range of objective indicators. Occupational health checks should include the measuring of movement, sedentary behaviour, and sleep using an accelerometer. An interactive accelerometer in combination with a phone app increases the effectiveness of physical activity counselling and reduces the human resources needed for counselling. The "momentum" of bringing up physical activity in healthcare encounters should be used much more effectively.

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A NEW MODEL FOR LEISURE ACTIVITIES

The Finnish model for leisure activities aims to ensure that all children and young people have at least one hobby in connection to the school day. This model should be developed further. There is a clear need for a new model of sports club activities in Finland supporting continued sports club activities further into adolescence. As they are based on voluntary work by the third sector, these activities should be developed in cooperation with the clubs themselves. The supply of activities must be user oriented and sufficiently diverse, with a focus on offering a range of different sports, so that as many children and young people as possible are inspired and encouraged to participate. When providing physical and sport activities, different user segments should be considered, so that there are enough meaningful options also for those interested in non-organised physical activity and non-competitive activities. Recreational activities should be organised so that the impact of family income on participation is minimized. With the encouragement of the clubs providing these leisure activities, as well as by developing the network of sports facilities, the use of active travel to and from the hobbies can be increased.

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A NEW, ACTIVE WAY OF WORKING AND LIVING – A CHANGE IN CULTURE

Every day involves countless choices to move or not to move – at school, at work, in care, and at home, as well as in various services. We need new, active ways of working, going to school, and delivering care. Both public and private spaces should be built to encourage physical activity. Cities, municipalities, and workplaces must be involved in this development. Work stations, meeting practices, and break rooms should be designed to encourage physical activity and taking breaks from sitting. By adding flexibility into the working hours, e.g. for those juggling parenthood and a career, we can provide more opportunities to increase physical activity in everyday life. 24/7 care should be designed to activate the service users. The aim should always be to use the present functional capacity of a person. Health technologies and digital services should be utilised to a much higher extent than today, for example to make people who move very little more active. So, let's work together to start a "Revolution for physical activity promotion"!



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The physical functional capacity of Finns has been declining for decades:

- The number of young men entering military service with poor physical fitness has increased eightfold
- The number of men with poor muscle fitness has increased manifold
- The average weight of new recruits has increased by 8 kg
- The results of the MOVE! measurements of schoolchildren show the same alarming trend also in schoolchildren.

As a result of the prolonged negative trend described above, the physical fitness of Finns of working age will continue to deteriorate significantly also in the coming decades. By 2040, according to a very conservative forecast, only very few people aged 50 or over in Finland will be in good physical fitness. This vicious cycle will lead to an increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases (such as type 2 diabetes, depression, cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal diseases, etc.). Being ill leads to increased sickness absences, earlier disability, and lower labour productivity. Unless this negative trend can be reversed, we will not be able to extend working life, the economic backbone of the state, municipalities, and cities will be broken, and the base of the national defence (the reserve army) will not hold up. The steady decline in fitness and increase in obesity will cause problems across all sectors of government.

No amount of economic growth will be enough if the downward spiral of the physical functional capacity and fitness of working-age Finns is not reversed. We need multiple, simultaneous, effective measures across all sectors, at the national as well as the local level. These simultaneous, multi-sectoral actions require strong leadership and coordination between different sectors. Therefore, at the national level, the Prime Minister's Office and, at the local level, the municipal or city management group, are capable actors to lead these simultaneous measures that are needed across sectors of government. Effective measures are needed for those in the working life today who are struggling with their physical functional capacity, as well as to ensure the functional capacity of the workforce in the future.

Healthy Lifestyles to Boost Sustainable Growth (STYLE) is combining interdisciplinary knowledge on trends in transport and physical activity. Interpreting them through infrastructure and service designs and changing lifestyles, we generate insight on novel business opportunities and intervention models that induce physical activity. This provides innovative pathways towards current national policy targets and promotion of the societal vision. The project is funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland.

Read more: www.styletutkimus.fi/en

READ MORE ABOUT THE STUDY

Vasankari, Tommi – Tokola, Kari – Raitanen, Jani – Kolu, Päivi – Vähä-Ypyä, Henri – Husu, Pauliina – Vaara, Jani – Kyröläinen, Heikki – Santtila, Matti – Pihlainen, Kai & Sievänen, Harri (2023) Suomalaisten kestävyyskunto on laskenut vuosikymmeniä – onko Suomessa tulevaisuudessa enää hyväkuntoisia yli 50-vuotiaita työntekijöitä? *Futura* 1/2023. [The cardiorespiratory fitness of the Finns has been decreasing for decades – are there any more employees of good physical fitness over the age of 50 in Finland in the future?]

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