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Exercise: The First Prescription for Cubans of All Ages

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Regular physical exercise improves quality of life and benefits the body's organs and systems: it tones and strengthens muscles; improves joint function; contributes to healthier heart and lungs; increases resistance to fatigue, and thus capacity for both physical and mental exertion; helps combat anxiety, depression and stress; improves sleep patterns; and is an important factor in maintaining healthy weight. It also provides a simple way of sharing with family and friends, even an opportunity for improving intergenerational communication and relations.

WHO recommends 30 minutes daily walking at a moderate pace. Benefits begin to accrue, says the WHO, after even one hour of exercise a week, while three to four hours are optimal. At Cuba's Sports Medicine Institute, our research corroborates other findings that persons who train regularly can shave off 10 to 15 years of their biological age. A person who is 50 years old and exercises presents functional indicators of a sedentary 40-year-old when it comes to heart rate, oxygen consumption, physical capacity and blood pressure.

In Cuba, there are 6000 sports facilities, including over 4000 outdoor playing fields; 41,000 people teach physical education or train athletes. Several thousand family doctor-and-nurse offices provide regular exercise classes for seniors. And more recently, hundreds of privately owned gyms have sprouted up in neighborhoods throughout Havana and other towns. But Cubans, by and large, still don't take advantage of these opportunities—most of them free of charge.

And we are paying the price. Various national studies on risk factors indicate that excess body weight (overweight and obesity) and physical inactivity are looming as important challenges for Cubans of all ages, as chronic non-communicable diseases (NCD) account for the main causes of disability and death in the country. In many cases, the years lost to disability and even death could have been prevented by modifying behavior: specifically, changing the way Cubans eat and how much we regularly exercise. So, simply moving our bodies more, and doing so systematically, is half the battle for health.

But meanwhile, Cubans are becoming dangerously overweight. In the adult population, overweight and obesity was already 31% in 2000-2001; among women, obesity was twice that of men: 15% compared to 7%.^[1] And, according to UNICEF, "Cuba has one of the highest rates of obesity among preschool children in Latin America."^[2] In a sample of some 200 obese children and adolescents in Havana, 88% were sedentary, showing preference for computer games, TV and handheld video games, and a resistance to physical activity.^[3]


Reasons for inactivity in children, adults and seniors vary. Some represent cultural shifts, such as the introduction of new technologies into leisure time; others have to do with the workplace, which in Cuba, as globally, has become more sedentary. However, an entire range of other issues can also play their part, from low risk perception to a beauty culture that favors plump, lack of support

systems to enable more free time for exercise, as well as socioeconomic factors.

I recommend three steps be taken to tackle the increasingly sedentary lives of our population:

- More research needs to be done into who exercises and who does not and why. How many people regularly exercise? What are their ages; where do they live; what kinds of exercise are they doing; are they supervised? Why are women twice as prone to obesity as men in Cuba?
- With the who and why in hand, then we need to generate an intersectoral movement to tackle the tough job of changing the way 11 million Cubans live, making regular exercise a fundamental part of daily life. This means going beyond the health and sports sectors to involve daycare centers, schools, universities, seniors clubs and particularly the mass media. In each area, we need multidisciplinary and systematic action.

- We need to make sure health professionals see exercise as a first line of therapy for major NCD killers. They should know, for example, that a recent megastudy in the *British Medical Journal* suggests exercise is just as effective as medication for treating leading NCD causes of death, preventing mortality from heart disease, diabetes and stroke. Not to mention for losing the excess weight that contributes to many of these conditions.^[4]

Systematic exercise is powerful preventive medicine. In Cuba we have the facilities, the trained personnel and the educational levels to absorb and act on this message: so let's get moving. 

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