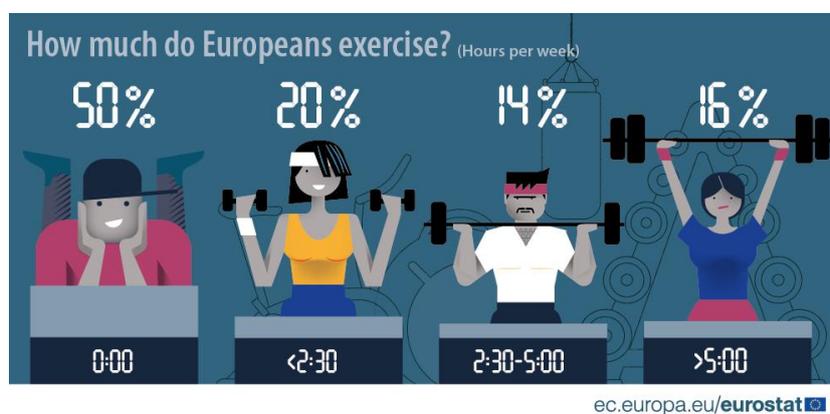


# Health-enhancing physical activity statistics

Statistics Explained

*Data extracted in June 2018.  
Planned update date: March 2022*



This article presents an overview of the statistics on the physical activity performed by the [European Union \(EU\)](#) population. Since physical activity can also be inherent to specific manual labour, it must be noted that the data covered in this article concern physical activities that are non-work-related, i.e. activities undertaken during leisure time and for personal well-being purposes only. The first part focuses on non-work-related activities done at least at a minimum level and thus reflecting a non-sedentary lifestyle. The second part elaborates on respondents' overall assessment of health enhancing-physical activities meeting a minimum level of activity to ensure a healthy lifestyle, and also provides an indication for different levels of time devoted to aerobic physical activities.

This article is one of a set of statistical articles concerning [health determinants](#) in the EU which forms part of an online publication on [health statistics](#).

## Non-work-related physical activity

The second wave of the [European health interview survey \(EHIS\)](#) was conducted between 2013 and 2015 and surveyed persons aged 15 and over. It included questions for the evaluation of different aspects in the lifestyles of Europeans having an impact on their health state, which among others, captured non-work-related physical activity. The latter includes commuting physical activities reflecting the way that persons usually get to and from places in a typical week, for example walking or cycling for at least ten minutes in order to get to and from work, school, shopping or market, as well as leisure-time physical activities that persons engage in for at least ten minutes continuously throughout a typical week. These cover sports, fitness and recreational activities that cause at least a small increase in breath or heart rate. Muscle-strengthening activities, such as resistance training, strength exercises, etc. are also considered.

## More than three quarters of the EU-28 population reported walking to get to and from places at least once a week

In 2014, around 44 % of the EU-28 population aged 15 and over reported participating in aerobic sports at least once a week (Table 1). This share varied two-fold across the EU; from less than 11 % in Bulgaria and Romania compared with more than 70 % in Finland, Denmark, Austria, Sweden, as well as Iceland. These countries were also on the top of the ranking in terms of the share of the population undertaking activities designed to strengthen muscles (more than 44 % of the population). Germany and Slovenia were also among the countries that recorded relatively high rates in muscle strengthening activities (44.1 % and 37.5 %, respectively), as opposed to Romania, Poland, Malta, Cyprus and Croatia, where less than 10 % of the population was engaged in such activities.

Share of persons aged 15 and over performing non-work-related physical activities at least once a week, by kind of activity, 2014 or nearest year (%)

	Aerobic sports	Cycling to get to and from place	Walking to get to and from place	Muscle-strengthening
EU-28 (*)	44.4	19.7	78.4	24.2
Belgium	..	..	..	..
Bulgaria	10.8	10.0	91.4	10.5
Czech Republic	34.7	35.5	92.2	19.3
Denmark	73.8	47.1	79.1	48.3
Germany	65.7	32.3	77.7	44.1
Estonia	35.2	24.2	80.1	15.4
Ireland	45.8	13.6	86.2	34.3
Greece	22.8	9.0	81.2	12.6
Spain	46.3	10.5	81.7	14.9
France	49.0	12.0	70.9	23.7
Croatia	21.6	30.2	85.7	9.6
Italy	25.5	16.5	74.3	13.9
Cyprus	38.8	2.2	16.5	9.1
Latvia	38.6	23.0	89.3	21.7
Lithuania	24.1	19.2	76.5	13.2
Luxembourg	65.4	17.4	88.6	36.8
Hungary	33.5	40.4	84.7	23.7
Malta	51.8	3.9	73.0	8.0
Netherlands	..	..	..	..
Austria	72.0	24.9	81.0	44.3
Poland	22.0	26.5	84.9	7.7
Portugal	35.0	5.8	60.7	13.0
Romania	4.9	12.8	99.0	1.9
Slovenia	54.7	34.2	83.1	37.5
Slovakia	33.7	33.3	89.2	16.6
Finland	74.1	25.9	82.7	52.8
Sweden	71.3	32.7	82.2	51.6
United Kingdom	57.3	8.3	70.8	27.3
Iceland	70.3	13.1	56.2	67.3
Norway	70.0	26.6	66.0	35.7
Turkey	7.5	5.3	75.5	3.3

(\*) Estimates.

Note: no available data for Belgium and the Netherlands.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: hlth\_egis\_pe3e)

eurostat

Table 1: Share of persons aged 15 and over performing non-work-related physical activities at least once a week, by kind of activity, 2014 or nearest year (%) Source: Eurostat (hlth\_egis\_pe3e)

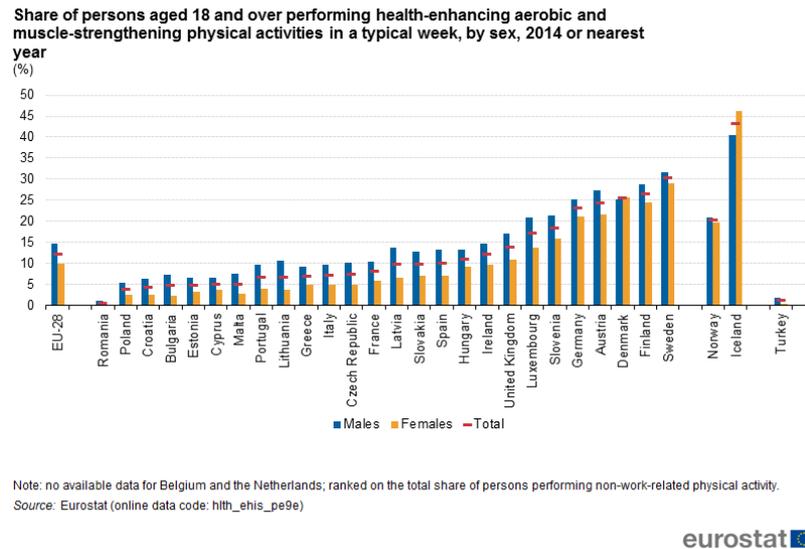
With regard to physically active transportation, a total of 78.4 % of Europeans spent at least 10 minutes of continuous walk to get to and from places on at least one day within a typical week. This share was relatively high across the majority of the EU Member States, since it accounted for more than two thirds of the reference population. Only in Portugal (60.7 %), as well as Iceland (56.2 %) and Norway (66.0 %) was the respective proportion slightly lower. The most notable exception was Cyprus (16.5 %). Cycling was a favoured commuting physical activity for more than one third of the population in Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Denmark. It was preferred by less than one in ten persons in Cyprus, Malta, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Greece.

## Health-enhancing physical activity

Physical activity benefits health and functional capacity. The World Health Organisation recommends for adults a minimum level of two and a half hours of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity per week, which should be performed in bouts of at least 10 minutes duration. It also suggests that muscle-strengthening activities involving major muscle groups should be done at a frequency of two or more days a week. In response to WHO recommendations, the second wave of EHIS provides data on the performance of both aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activities by Europeans.

The highest proportions of the population reaching the recommended physical activity levels were recorded in Finland and Sweden

Figure 1 focuses on the proportion of the adult population who performed both aerobic physical activities of moderate intensity for at least two and a half hours per week as well as muscle-strengthening activities for at least two days per week. Among the Europeans aged 18 and over, the proportion of those engaged in both aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities in line with the recommendations was about 12 % in 2014. In most EU Member States, this proportion accounted for less than one fifth of the reference population; it recorded its highest values in Germany (23.2 %), Austria (24.4 %), Denmark (25.5 %), Finland (26.5 %) and peaking at 30.3 % in Sweden. Iceland and Norway also reported a high share (43.3 % and 20.3 %, respectively). In contrast, less than 5 % of the population in Estonia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland and Romania took part in the recommended amount of physical activity.



**Figure 1: Share of persons aged 18 and over performing health-enhancing aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activities in a typical week, by sex, 2014 or nearest year(%)**Source: Eurostat (hlth\_ehis\_pe9e)

**The average gender gap between men and women meeting the recommended levels of aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activity was almost 5 percentage points**

An analysis by sex indicates that a higher share of men than women in the EU-28 who were doing both aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities reached the recommended minimum levels of activity (14.6 % for men compared to 9.9 % for women) (Figure 1). There are clear cross-country differences when looking at the prevalence of aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activities across sexes. Gender gaps were most pronounced in Latvia, Luxembourg and Lithuania, where the difference between the two sexes was about 7 percentage points. They were as low as 3 percentage points or less in Poland, Cyprus, Sweden and Romania. By contrast, in Denmark, as well as Iceland, women exercised more than men (a difference of 0.4 and 5.6 percentage points, respectively).

**Recommended aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activity levels decreased with increasing age**

Equally, age is another important factor, with the share of persons spending the recommended amount of time on exercise decreasing with age (see Table 2). That said, there was a relatively high prevalence of leisure-time physical activities being undertaken among young people (aged 18–24 and 25–34). Moving to the oldest age group, at EU-28 level, less than one in ten persons aged 55–64 were engaged in physical activities according to the current recommendations, a share that fell to 7.3 % among those aged 65 and over.

**Share of persons aged 18 and over performing health-enhancing aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activities in a typical week, by age, 2014 or nearest year (%)**

	18 years or over	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 years or over
<b>EU-28</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>23.6</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>7.9</b>
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bulgaria	4.7	16.8	11.2	5.6	3.4	0.9	0.3
Czech Republic	7.5	23.7	13.8	8.0	5.2	2.5	1.0
Denmark	25.5	40.8	27.0	23.4	25.3	21.3	20.8
Germany	23.2	37.4	26.4	19.0	21.8	22.5	19.6
Estonia	4.8	11.0	8.6	4.7	4.8	2.5	1.0
Ireland	12.2	22.1	20.1	14.2	10.1	6.4	2.8
Greece	6.9	19.2	15.5	8.1	5.5	2.6	0.8
Spain	10.1	22.5	16.4	10.9	8.3	6.3	3.7
France	8.1	16.1	10.4	7.7	7.1	7.9	4.2
Croatia	4.3	13.9	7.0	5.0	3.4	1.7	0.6
Italy	7.2	16.8	12.7	9.4	7.0	4.3	2.0
Cyprus	5.0	10.7	8.7	4.8	4.1	1.5	0.8
Latvia	9.7	25.5	18.1	10.3	6.4	4.9	2.5
Lithuania	6.8	21.7	12.1	7.1	4.4	2.2	0.9
Luxembourg	17.3	31.4	20.6	18.2	15.4	15.2	8.1
Hungary	11.1	26.3	18.3	11.9	10.0	5.1	3.2
Malta	5.1	15.1	8.5	4.8	2.7	1.7	0.9
Netherlands	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Austria	24.4	38.6	24.8	19.9	21.0	24.4	23.2
Poland	3.9	12.9	7.1	5.0	1.3	1.2	0.3
Portugal	6.6	17.2	15.1	6.3	3.7	3.9	1.8
Romania	0.6	2.6	1.4	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.0
Slovenia	18.5	37.6	26.7	17.8	19.7	13.2	8.7
Slovakia	9.9	25.2	15.6	10.5	7.0	3.8	0.8
Finland	25.5	46.2	34.9	23.4	25.9	20.1	18.5
Sweden	30.3	47.2	35.7	30.4	29.8	26.2	22.6
United Kingdom	13.8	23.5	20.3	15.5	13.9	10.4	6.7
Iceland	43.3	59.9	53.0	46.4	42.2	36.5	26.6
Norway	20.3	41.4	29.5	16.8	19.0	13.3	9.9
Turkey	1.1	2.6	1.5	1.3	0.4	0.2	0.1

Note: no available data for Belgium and the Netherlands.  
Source: Eurostat (online data code: hlth\_ehis\_pe9e)

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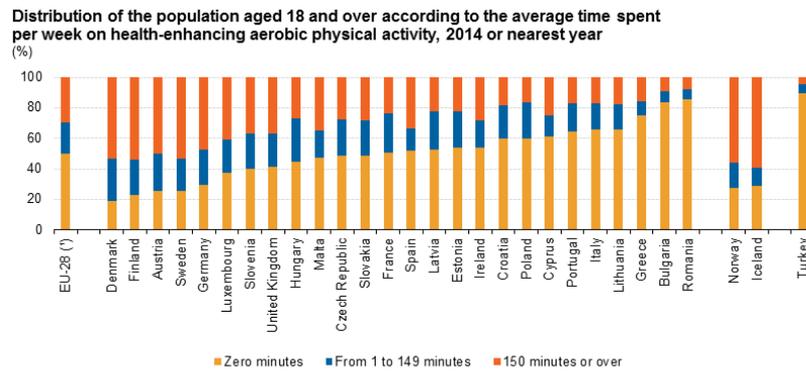
**Table 2: Share of persons aged 18 and over performing health-enhancing aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activities in a typical week, by age, 2014 or nearest year (%)** Source: Eurostat (hlth\_ehis\_pe9e)

This pattern was evident across almost all EU Member States. The only exception was Austria for the class covering those aged 55 to 64 and 65 and over, where the share of persons meeting the minimum recommended physical activity level was higher than for middle-aged people (aged 45-54 and 55-64 years).

Looking across age groups, there are also clear cross-country differences on the prevalence of aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activities. Among those aged 18 to 24, the share of persons reporting to reach the recommended activity levels exceeded 35 % in six Member States, namely, Germany, Slovenia, Austria, Denmark, Finland and Sweden. With the exception of Slovenia, those countries recorded also high shares (ranging from 20 % to 23 %) among those aged 65 and over and were much ahead of the remaining countries, where the respective shares did not exceed 9 %.

### About 30 % of Europeans aged 18 and over engaged in aerobic physical activities for at least two and a half hours per week

Focusing upon aerobic activities only, it is observed that almost half of the EU population aged 18 and over did not undertake any kind of such activities at all (Figure 2). More specifically, in 13 out of the 26 EU Member States for which data are available, the proportion of persons who did not spend any leisure time on exercising exceeded 50 %. This share varied from less than 25 % in Denmark (19.3 %) and Finland (23.3 %) to more than 70 % in Greece (75.2 %), Bulgaria (84.0 %) and Romania (85.9 %). Particularly in the latter two countries, less than 10 % of the population reported doing physical activities for at most two and a half hours within a typical week, well below the respective EU-28 average (20.4 %). At the other end of the scale, the highest proportions of people who spent at least two and a half hours per week exercising were found in Finland (54.1 %), Denmark (53.4 %) and Sweden (53.1 %), followed by Austria (49.8 %) and Germany (47.3 %), as well as in Iceland and Norway (59.5 % and 55.8 %, respectively).



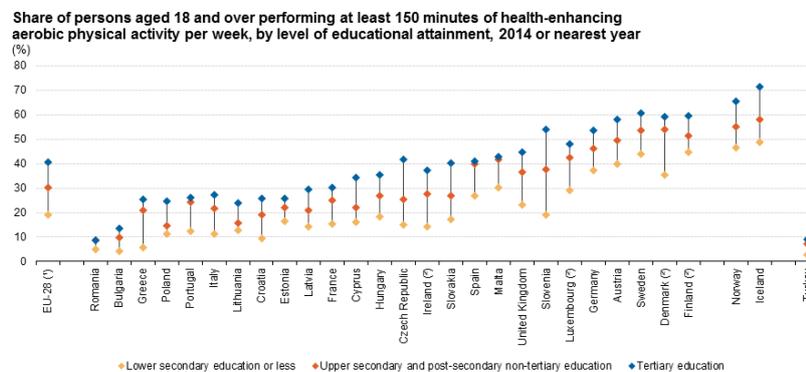
(\*) Estimates.  
 Note: no available data for Belgium and the Netherlands; ranked on the total share of persons not performing at all aerobic physical activity.  
 Source: Eurostat (online data code: hlth\_ehis\_pe2e)



**Figure 2: Distribution of the population aged 18 and over according to the average time spent per week on health-enhancing aerobic physical activity, 2014 or nearest year (%)** Source: Eurostat (hlth\_ehis\_pe2e)

**The percentage of Europeans meeting the weekly recommended level of aerobic physical activity increased with increasing level of educational attainment**

Overall in the EU-28, 40.5 % of people with a high level of education spent at least two and a half hours per week on aerobic physical activities in 2014, as compared to 30.3 % of those with upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education and less than a fifth (19.2 %) for those with a low level of educational attainment — see Figure 3.



(\*) Estimates.  
 (\*) Unreliable data for lower secondary education or less.  
 Note: no available data for Belgium and the Netherlands; ranked on the total share of persons performing at least 150 minutes of aerobic physical activity.  
 Source: Eurostat (online data code: hlth\_ehis\_pe2e)

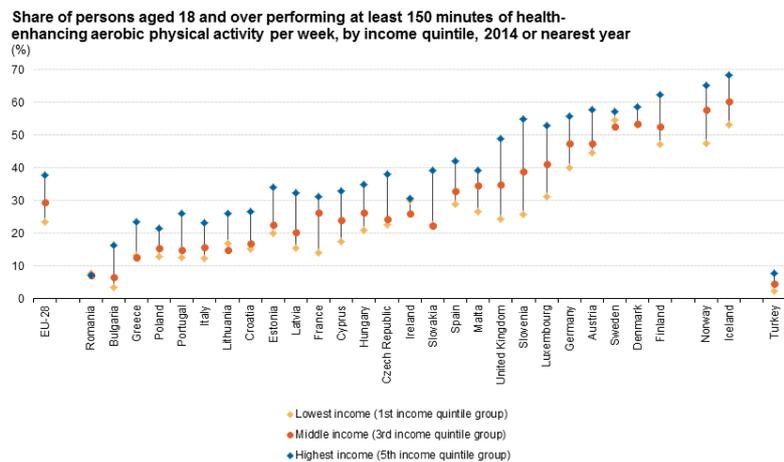


**Figure 3: Share of persons aged 18 and over performing at least 150 minutes of health-enhancing aerobic physical activity per week, by level of educational attainment, 2014 or nearest year (%)** Source: Eurostat (hlth\_ehis\_pe2e)

A detailed look at country level reveals that this pattern was universal across all EU countries. Differences between high and low educated people exceeded 20 percentage points in the United Kingdom, Slovakia, Ireland, Denmark, the Czech Republic, peaking at 35 percentage points in Slovenia.

**Almost 40 % of the adult EU-28 population in the highest income quintile engaged in aerobic physical activities for at least 150 minutes per week**

Income is another important factor linked to the prevalence of aerobic physical activity. On average, it is observed that the proportion of adults exercising at least two and a half hours per week increased with increasing income (Figure 4). In 2014, 37.8 % of the EU-28 population in the fifth **income quintile group** (the 20 % of the population with the highest income) reported spending the recommended amount of physical activity per week, compared to 29.6 % in the third income quintile group and 23.6 % in the first income quintile group (the 20 % of the population with the lowest income).



Note: no available data for Belgium and the Netherlands; ranked on the total share of persons performing at least 150 minutes of aerobic physical activity. Source: Eurostat (online data code: hlth\_ehis\_pe2i)



**Figure 4: Share of persons aged 18 and over performing at least 150 minutes of health-enhancing aerobic physical activity per week, by income quintile, 2014 or nearest year(%)**Source: Eurostat (hlth\_ehis\_pe2i)

At country level, Romania was the only exception to this general pattern, since its highest rate was recorded among those in the lowest income quintile group, followed by those in third and fifth income groups. The largest gaps among those in the highest and lowest income levels were recorded in Luxembourg, the United Kingdom and Slovenia, all in excess of 20 percentage points.

## Source data for tables and graphs

- [Physical activity statistics: tables and figures](#)

## Data sources

The data used in the article come from the second wave of the [European health interview survey \(EHIS\)](#) that was conducted in all EU Member States during 2013–2015 according to [European Commission Regulation \(EU\) No 141/2013](#) and its subsequent amendment to take account of the accession of Croatia to the EU ( [European Commission Regulation \(EU\) No 68/2014](#) ).

[Derogations from Regulation \(EC\) No 1338/2008](#) , as implemented by the Commission concerning statistics based on the European Health Interview Survey (EHIS), were granted for Belgium and the Netherlands as far as physical activity data are concerned.

The general coverage of the EHIS is the population aged 15 or over living in private households residing in the national territory. This source is documented in more detail in this [background article](#) which provides information on the scope of the data, its legal basis, the methodology employed, as well as related concepts and definitions.

The indicators presented in the article focus on the frequency and amount of leisure-time physical activities performed within a typical week. They aim to provide useful insight for the measurement of the effect of physical activity on the European's health status.

The data on non-work-related physical activity cover activities such as aerobic sports, cycling and walking to get to and from places, and muscle-strengthening activities undertaken at least once a week.

Under health-enhancing physical activities, sports (including aerobic sports, as well as cycling as a form of transportation) and muscle-strengthening activities are included. The respective indicator aims to respond to the minimum level of non-work-related physical activity recommended by the WHO.

It is noted that aerobic activities, as well as walking and cycling, shall be performed in bouts of at least 10 minutes continuous duration. Muscle-strengthening activities are not the same as aerobic activities such as jogging, swimming or cycling, since they are usually performed in sets of repetitions, each with an approximate duration of one to two minutes with breaks between the sets, and thus are not performed at least 10 minutes continuously.

### Limitations of the data

The indicators presented in this article are derived from self-reported data so they are, to a large extent, based on own assessment of total duration spent on performing all sports, fitness and recreational activities in a typical week.

## Context

As a social behaviour the extent of physical activity in the everyday lives of European citizens depends on such diverse factors as availability of leisure time, access to activity spaces, cultural factors, as well as the socio-economic profile of specific societal groups. On the other hand, there is a general consensus on the positive effects physical activity has on health status and indirectly on public health costs, as well as the overall benefits for the economy of a healthy workforce. For these reasons, governments may institute policies to promote physical activity habits in education, as well as among the general population, through health campaigns, by investing in and ensuring the availability of public spaces for physical activity, and also by monitoring the factors that may prove an obstacle for the exercise of physical activity, such as work intensity and lack of leisure time.

To this end, in 2008, the Commission published the [EU Guidelines](#) for the development and implementation of cross-sectoral policies in support of health enhancing physical activity (HEPA). Within this context, the Guidelines set a number of policy areas for action, such as sport, transport, education, urban planning, public safety, working environment and senior citizens.

Based on the proposal of the Commission, the Council adopted its first Recommendation on ' [Promoting health-enhancing physical activity across sectors](#) ' (2013/C 354/01) in 2013. The Recommendation encourages Member States in adopting cross-sectoral policy approaches and action plans for the promotion of physical activity and enhances policy coordination among them. It establishes a framework for monitoring the progress of HEPA through a set of 23 indicators covering different relevant thematic areas. In response to the Council's request for reporting progress on the implementation of the Recommendation every three years, the Commission issued a report on the ' [Implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting health-enhancing physical activity across sectors](#) ' in 2016. Based on the contributions of the Member States, the progress report elaborates on problems encountered and suggestions related to the implementation of the HEPA framework.

In addition, the [World Health Organisation](#) makes recommendations for children, adults and older people separately concerning the frequency, duration, intensity, type and amount of the required physical activity for the prevention of non-communicable diseases. More specifically, it recommends for adults at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity weekly or at least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity or an equivalent combination of moderate and vigorous-intensity activity. It also suggests that muscle-strengthening activities should be done for major groups at a frequency of two or more days a week.

An indicator linked to WHO HEPA recommendations about the population fulfilling the WHO recommendation on aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activity is included in the determinants of health chapter of the [European core health indicators \(ECHI\)](#) .

## See also

### Online publications

- [Health in the European Union — facts and figures](#)
- [Disability statistics](#)

### Methodology

- [European health interview survey](#)

### General health statistics articles

- [Health statistics introduced](#)
- [Health statistics at regional level](#)
- [The EU in the world — health](#)

## Database

- [Health determinants \(health\\_det\)](#)

[Physical activity \(hlth\\_pha\)](#)

## Dedicated section

- [Health](#)
- [Health status and determinants](#)

## Publications

- [Health statistics — Atlas on mortality in the European Union](#)

## Methodology

- [European health interview survey \(EHIS\) \(ESMS metadata file — hlth\\_det\\_esms\)](#)
- [European Health Interview Survey \(EHIS wave 2\) — Methodological manual — 2013 edition](#)

## External links

- [European Commission — Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety — European core health indicators \(ECHI\)](#)
- [World Health Organisation — Physical activity](#)
- [European Commission — Factsheets on health-enhancing physical activity in the 28 Member States of the WHO European Region](#)
- [World Health Organisation — Global recommendations on physical activity for health](#)
- [The European Network for the Promotion of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity — Guidelines for health-enhancing physical activity promotion programmes](#)