It All Counts: HHS Releases Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition

By Kathleen Janz, (#506)

On Monday, November 12, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released the second edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. The second (2018) edition builds on the first (2008) edition to provide a comprehensive set of recommendations for health-related physical activity for toddlers through older adults. Importantly, the new guidelines are informed by a contemporary and thorough scientific review of the dose-response evidence linking physical activity and health. No surprise that health-related physical activity research has increased exponentially in 10 years so new guidelines contain much new (and important) information. Even less of a surprise that NAK members contributed significantly to the new guidelines (e.g., several active members served on the committee that conducted the scientific report.) A flip through that report indicates that in every chapter, some NAK member is cited. Every single chapter.

Some of the new 2018 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans information includes recommendations for children ages three through five, women during pregnancy and the postpartum period, adults with chronic health conditions, and adults with disabilities. What runs through the recommendations is the clear theme that “everything counts.” For example, the 10-minute bout requirement for achieving 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per week (2008 guideline) is gone; the scientific evidence did not support it. An additional echo of “everything counts” is seen in the centering of immediate benefits of physically activity. One physically active day improves mood, cognition, and sleep. It’s worth the effort due to the immediate payback. If a basic rule of health promotion is to start with your client, patient, or population, giving credit for a volume measure like “a little more even if just for one day” seems respectful. And of course, research in behavior science suggests this strategy may succeed where other strategies have failed.

What isn’t in the new guidelines is a “hard” number for sitting time. The current evidence indicates that there is an interaction between sitting and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity as they influence health. See this red (caution) to green (go) graphic from the guidelines on how this issue is handled. Conveying interaction, even to graduate students, can be a challenging task. I hope this graphic works.

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Although starting with what physical activity is being done and working toward more is a logical message, throughout the 2018 guidelines, dose-response research is used to set hard numbers, necessary for population surveillance, personal health monitoring, and knowing “how much.” Regrettably, those numbers suggest, as a population, we are falling short with adherence (e.g., 26% of men, 19% of women, and 20% of adolescents don’t meet the 2008 guidelines). There is much work to be done.

The guidelines, scientific advisory committee report, press releases, toolkits for action are available at www.health.gov/paguidelines.