

# Netherlands: get up on your feet!

## Make daily regular physical activity a natural habit

### Summary

#### Urgency

As a nation, we suffer from physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour. The World Health Organisation calls this a pandemic of physical inactivity. This silent catastrophe is causing up to 5,800 premature deaths and €2.7 billion in health care costs in the Netherlands alone each year. Physical inactivity can lead to adverse health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes or depression. Vice versa, regular physical activity has been proven to make a positive contribution to the physical, mental, social and economic well-being of both individuals and society as a whole. Employees who are physically active are more productive, and physically active pupils are better able to concentrate in school. In terms of health outcomes, people who meet the guidelines for physical activity recover more quickly and are more resilient against disease.

A sizeable proportion of both young and old people in the Netherlands does not meet the guidelines for physical activity. In 2020, 53 percent of people in the Netherlands aged four and over were physically active. In 2022, this had declined to 44 per cent – the same level as in 2016. This goes to show that the target in the National Prevention Agreement of getting 75 per cent of Dutch people to meet the guidelines for physical activity in 2040, is increasingly beyond reach. It is time for the Netherlands to get up and get active.

#### Causes

In the Netherlands, undertaking regular physical activity is no longer a matter of personal choice. The Netherlands Sports Council has identified a number of external causes. Firstly, this is the effect of social developments. Policy decisions are often guided primarily by economic motives, whereas their consequences for people's health are given insufficient priority. In the healthcare system, more money and attention is devoted to treating diseases than to preventing them. As regards occupational health and safety, the main focus of the social partners is on addressing unsafe working practices in order to prevent accidents at work. Unhealthy work-related factors, such as remaining seated for too long, are often overlooked. On top of that, our living environment is increasingly geared to comfort and risk avoidance, thus limiting opportunities for physical exercise. Examples include the installation of lifts and escalators in buildings and on-street parking. Technological advancements, such as online grocery shopping and e-bikes, have also reduced the need to undertake physical activity. In sum, physical activity no longer comes naturally.

Secondly, both the government and people themselves tend to regard regular physical activity as a matter of personal responsibility. However, when people's socio-economic security is under threat from circumstances such as poverty or ill health (or a combination thereof), taking on this responsibility becomes a serious challenge. These people struggle to get moving in both the literal and figurative sense.

Thirdly, many people depend on meeting the criteria for physical activity in their spare time, for example by gardening or exercising. Many people who are physically inactive are often encouraged to play sports. This is in spite of the fact that the majority of them have no interest in or are turned off by sports. Moreover in general, the physical activity people undertake in their spare time is often insufficient to meet the guidelines for physical activity and does not compensate for the lengthy amounts of time that people spend sitting each day. The Netherlands Sports Council believes that being more physically active and less sedentary should be given more attention in most people's everyday surroundings, such as in childcare, at school, at work, in care institutions and in their living environment.

Despite the many initiatives that have been launched over the decades to encourage physical activity, figures show no increase in the proportion of people in the Netherlands that meets the guidelines for physical activity. Government policy has not been able to make improvements either. Reasons for this include the relatively short-term nature of many policy initiatives, insufficient funding, a poor notion of their effectiveness and overly one-sided approaches by individual ministries.

### Vision

The Netherlands Sports Council has formulated a vision in which regular physical activity every day comes naturally to all. A healthy lifestyle that includes physical activity and less sedentary behaviour is an essential condition for a thriving, social society and widespread prosperity. This is the joint responsibility of the government, civil-society organisations and individuals, each of which have their own roles and tasks. As the Netherlands Sports Council sees it, being active is not exclusively a matter of personal choice. Rather, it should be a natural part of everyday life at school and in childcare, in people's living environments, at work and in care institutions. Specific measures should be taken to ensure that regular physical activity and taking breaks from sitting is integrated into these environments, so that people start to feel less non-committal. This everyday physical activity in the environments mentioned should be supplemented by people's leisure activities, such as sports. Because meeting the guidelines for physical activity is good, but being more physically active is better.

### Recommendations

Below, the Netherlands Sports Council makes six recommendations for bringing about systemic change to realise the aforementioned vision.

#### *1. Draw up a new road map towards increased physical activity*

The Netherlands Sports Council advises the government to change course drastically with the aim of making regular physical activity a natural part of everyday life. To achieve this, ministries must adopt a joint strategy that stretches across multiple terms of office and includes agreements on long-term funding.

This new course should dovetail with a societal shift from a primarily financial and economic perspective to a perspective guided by widespread prosperity and health. Such a societal shift is a dire necessity if we want people in the Netherlands to live longer and healthier lives with all the social and economic benefits that entails.

#### *2. The government should take the lead in the transition to sufficient physical activity every day*

It is essential that the authorities, the private sector, civil-society organisations and individuals take on a joint responsibility. The Netherlands Sports Council advises the government to take the lead in the transition to sufficient physical activity every day, dividing

its responsibility across multiple ministries and policy areas. As a minimum, these should include the Ministries of Health, Welfare and Sport; the Interior and Kingdom Relations; Social Affairs and Employment; Education, Culture and Sciences; Infrastructure and Water Management; and Economic Affairs and Climate Policy. Political responsibility can remain with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. Furthermore, the Netherlands Sports Council recommends appointing a State Secretary for Physical Activity and Sports with a coordinating mandate to devise and implement a long-term strategy.

### *3. Build coalitions to make physical activity come naturally*

The Netherlands Sports Council advises the government to build coalitions with organisations at work, in health care, in education and in spatial planning. This encompasses municipal departments, employers, childcare and school boards, care providers, urban planners, mobility developers and leisure activities and sports providers. The responsible ministries should draw up a list of the factors that impede or encourage undertaking physical activity and what action their coalition partners in the various sectors could take, possibly in tandem with or enforced by the government. Agreements on this should be recorded and adaptable to new developments. These coalitions should agree on specific targets and what is needed in terms of funding and organisation to achieve them. Organisations such as the Movement Alliance could advise the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport on how the government could encourage the coalitions in the various sectors with frameworks and incentives.

### *4. Define the role of the government at all levels*

When it comes to promoting sufficient physical activity every day across the various sectors, the national, provincial and municipal authorities are key players. The Netherlands Sports Council recommends aligning their responsibilities, instruments (such as legislation and regulations) and financial resources with their roles in the various sectors. Make these roles specific, transparent and complementary. Additionally, agree on specific targets at all levels as well as proper monitoring and reporting with regard to the progress of the transition. Provide more funding for initiatives that facilitate target groups to become more physically active to reduce the time pressure on the implementation of programmes and projects. As an example, the ministries could set up funds with a 100% annual budget shift.

### *5. Aim for a mix of various types of interventions*

The Netherlands Sports Council believes that education and awareness is essential as the first step on the intervention ladder towards increased physical activity. However, it recommends using the other intervention opportunities – such as using encouraging and discouraging incentives or limiting individual choice where necessary – as well. In that context, the Netherlands Sports Council recommends defining standards for the various sectors that provide more of an incentive to take the next logical step. Ways to do this include introducing a physical activity effect report for the living environment or including more specific targets in legislation and ensuing documents. Use a tailor-made approach to meet the needs of different groups of people.

### *6. Safeguard the acquisition and sharing of knowledge*

There is a lack of unambiguous figures concerning the use and effects of measures to encourage increased physical activity, such as interventions or changes in the law. This is due to insufficient monitoring at the central level. As a consequence, we lack insight into what works and what does not. Invest in knowledge management in the area of physical activity and sitting for long periods of time. Measure the impact of interventions on physical activity behaviour and study their contributions to health, well-being, social cohesion, a

sustainable living environment, economic growth and equality of opportunity. This will make it possible to identify best practices (as well as disseminate them more broadly) and implement measures in a more targeted (and cost-effective) way.