

Edmonton youth need more physical activity: study

Like their Canadian peers, they are sitting around too much, study finds

BY FIONA BUCHANAN, EDMONTON JOURNAL MAY 23, 2014 12:41 PM



Be it hand-held devices, TVs, computers or laptops, the preliminary results gleaned from a new study suggest that young Edmontonians spend an average of 40 hours each Monday to Friday in front of a screen, confirming that the city's youth — like their peers across the country — are leading less active, sedentary lifestyles.

Photograph by: Getty Images, file, Getty Images Europe

EDMONTON - Edmonton's young people are not moving nearly as much as they should be and one researcher now has the data to prove it.

Be it hand-held devices, TVs, computers or laptops, the preliminary results gleaned from a new study suggest that young Edmontonians spend an average of 40 hours each Monday to Friday in front of a screen, confirming that the city's youth — like their peers across the country — are leading less active, sedentary lifestyles.

Sangita Sharma, a professor at the University of Alberta, discovered these results in the research component of an long-term project, called "Why Act Now," which looked at physical activity and nutrition in a group of approximately 550 Edmonton young people aged 11 to 23. The project, which was funded by Alberta Health and the Public Health Agency of Canada, will aim to help youth to adapt healthier lifestyles in Edmonton.

Sharma says the initial findings of the study reveal that a majority of young people “by far” take a car, bus or LRT to school as opposed to walking or cycling, and that 20 per cent of young people in the city are overweight and another 10.5 per cent are obese.

Although the findings are only preliminary at this stage and the exact numbers may change slightly, Sharma says the overall implications warrant some type of intervention to promote healthier lifestyles among Edmonton youth.

Sharma’s results come just days after Active Healthy Kids Canada assigned the country an overall grade of D- for the physical activity levels of children aged 5 to 19, one of the lowest grades in a study comparing Canada against 14 other countries. John Spence, a University of Alberta professor who worked on the AHKC report card, says Albertan children’s physical activity habits do not differ much from the rest of Canada. “We’re not worse off and we’re not really ahead of the game either,” he says.

One of the reasons children get less physical activity might be due to parental worries that keep children from commuting by foot or by bike, Spence suggests.

“We have concerns about stranger danger and traffic related concerns, but these concerns don’t reflect the actual threat.”

Even more influential might be the allure of new technologies.

“Now we have lots of interesting things to do without having to get up and move around,” Spence said. “It’s an easy trap to fall into.”

Both Sharma and Spence agree that the solution lies in getting children and young adults moving as a part of their daily life, not just in scheduled activities. They say this means reviewing city bylaws and rules in schools that can unintentionally prevent children from being active (for instance, the bylaw against riding bicycles on sidewalks), creating safer routes for children to walk and cycle to school and getting kids away from the multitude of entertainment devices in their lives.

The next stage of Sharma’s project is to begin partnering with the Edmonton School Board to provide culturally sensitive initiatives to improve physical activity levels for students of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Sharma says she hopes it can be developed to provide a model for provincewide initiatives.

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