

# **Trends in population levels of sufficient physical activity in NSW, 1998 to 2005**

## **Full Report**

Josephine Chau, Ben Smith,  
Tien Chey, Dafna Merom  
& Adrian Bauman  
NSW Centre for Physical Activity and Health  
University of Sydney

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## Executive summary

This report presents the trends in physical activity participation in NSW between 1998 and 2005. There is evidence to suggest that the prevalence of sufficient physical activity in NSW has increased significantly in recent years. Due to the potential public health benefits of such a change, closer scrutiny was given to NSW Population Health Survey data (1998 and 2002-2005) in order to determine whether the change reflects actual behavioural trends in the state.

Specifically, trends in sufficient physical activity participation were examined and further analyses of walking, moderate and vigorous intensity activity were conducted. Comparisons were made with surveillance data obtained from other Australian states in order to contextualise the trends seen in NSW.

The main findings from the report suggest that:

- Between 1998 and 2005, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of people aged 16 years and over in NSW undertaking sufficient physical activity (at least 150 minutes of walking, moderate and/or vigorous activity per week over at least five occasions).
- The prevalence of sufficient physical activity was stable from 1998 (47.6%) to 2002 (46.5%), decreased in 2003 (44.7%), increased markedly in 2004 (50.5%) and remained steady in 2005 (51.3%).
- Significant increases in the prevalence of sufficient physical activity occurred among males and females, people in the 35-44 and 45-54 age groups, across BMI categories, people in the second and third most disadvantaged socioeconomic status quintiles, people living in major cities, and among people residing in three Area Health Service areas (Sydney South West, Sydney West, and Northern Sydney Central Coast).
- Walking was a major contributor to the change in prevalence of sufficient physical activity, with increased participation in walking since 2004. There were also some increases in moderate and vigorous activity.
- NSW is the only state showing a sustained increase in prevalence of sufficient physical activity compared with other states using the Active Australia Survey.

It is likely that the apparent increase in NSW in the prevalence of sufficient physical activity is real. This increase may be largely due to greater participation in walking.

This report also considered several possible explanations for the increase in prevalence of sufficient physical activity. Findings suggest that:

- The potential of social desirability bias leading to over-reporting of physical activity participation in recent years can not be ruled out definitively.
- It is possible that increased media coverage of physical activity and obesity between 2001 and 2004 has helped to increase the salience of these issues and motivated people in NSW to participate in physical activity.
- Changes in active commuting behaviours, specifically growth in prevalence of walking to work, and rising petrol prices may have contributed to the increase in physical activity levels.

- It is possible that recent increases in physical activity participation are a result of intensive physical activity promotion work that occurred in the late 1990s in NSW, that led to greater awareness and understanding of the Active Australia moderate physical activity message in NSW compared with other states.
- The prevalence of sufficient physical activity was unlikely to have been affected by changes in Area Health Service boundaries, sample size and survey response rates; the inclusion of household and gardening activity questions from the survey in 1998, 2002 and 2005, and omission in 2003 and 2004; the increased exercise and sport participation rates between 2001 and 2004; or weather and seasonal variation.