PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND LIFESTYLE OF THE ELDERLY

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Abstract. Systematic physical activity leads to some physical and psychological benefits for the body, and therefore, it is considered to be best practice in the prevention of public health. This statement is particularly important in the case of the elderly, as regular, individually-designed exercises, give way to an active lifestyle, which is important in the light of the increasing number of the elderly in Poland. The study aimed to evaluate physical activity of University of the Third Age students. The research material consisted of 73 people aged 60–74. Utilized in the study was a diagnostic survey method, with a specially-designed survey questionnaire constituted of 20 questions referring to pro-health lifestyle and physical activity of the subjected group. Based on the results analysis, it was concluded that the subjected elderly lead a healthy lifestyle and systematically undertake physical activity, which seems to be a very positive tendency.

Key words: physical activity, lifestyle, the elderly

Introduction

Little physical activity is a major problem in the modern society, and its lack is usually intertwined with a variety of diseases, such as: ischaemic heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, lipid disorders, osteoporosis, overweight, or obesity (Aadahla et al. 2002; Bownik and Saab 2009; Gross 1999). Physical activity is viewed as one of the most required recreational forms due to its fundamental pro-health and modern-age diseases preventive qualities. There are plenty psycho- physiological effects of physical activity, and most importantly, all of them help to achieve physical, psychological, and social well-being, which, accordingly to the world standards, all constitute health (Gracz and Sankowski 2001). It becomes particularly important in the case of elderly as regular physical activity allows for an active lifestyle in all its areas: family, social, and even professional lives. Systematic physical activity is considered to be the only way of keeping fit in the long-term perspective. Practicing sport by the elderly can help slowing down the ageing processes and slower decrease in overall fitness. Thus, to keep physical fitness, one has to be physically active. Every single person should be aware of the variety of physical activities one can choose from, to not only maintain good physical and mental health, but also to fit one's lifestyle. The importance

of physical activity in a human's life make it prone to scientific evaluation. The role of human's physical activity cannot only be intertwined with catering for biological needs, because the essence of human's physical activity also penetrates physical and social spheres (Osiński 2002). Taking all the above into consideration, it is therefore necessary to conduct the research evaluating physical and pro-health activities of University of the Third Age students.

Material and methods

The research was conducted in Wałcz in November 2013 during National Conference of Universities of the Third Age, titled: "Physical Activity of the Elderly". The research material constituted of 73 conference participants – residents of Wałcz, Poznań, Kalisz, Złocieniec, Rewal, Szczecin, and Zielona Góra. Utilized in the study was a diagnostic survey method, with a specially-designed survey questionnaire constituted of 20 questions in reference to pro-health lifestyle and physical activity of the subjected group. The research participants group consisted of 82.2% women and 17.8% men. All participants claimed to had led a professionally active lifestyle in the past.

The surveyed group age was within the range of 60 to 74 years old. The most numerous group were participants aged 60–64 (47.9%), following that, a group aged 65–69. Only 8.2% of all participants were more than 69 years old (Figure 1).

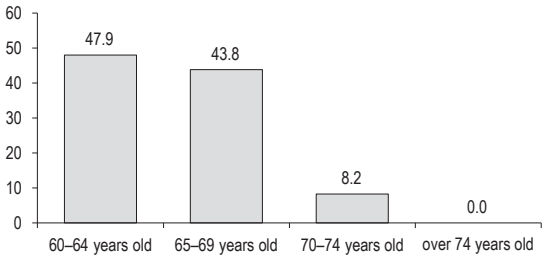

Figure 1. Participants age (%)

In most cases, the participants had proper body weight, or they were characterized by a slight overweight. Only 10% of all subjects were severely overweight (over 10 kg) (Figure 2).

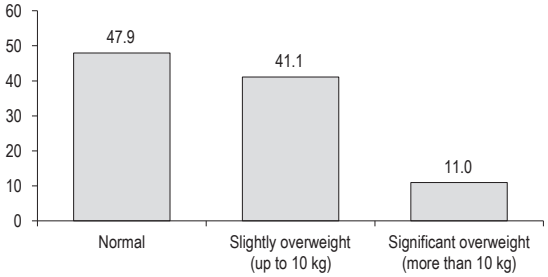

Figure 2. Participants body weight (%)

More than half of the participants had secondary education, and about 20.0% of them had MA degree and higher vocational education (Figure 3).

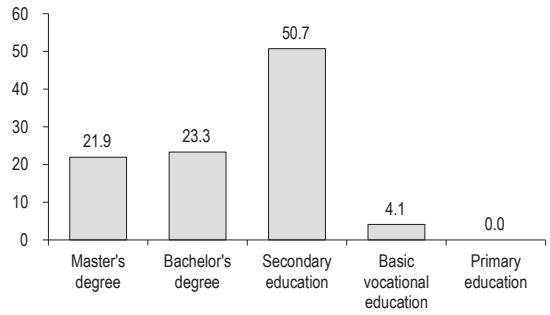

Figure 3. Participants level of education (%)

The greatest volume of respondents (72.6%) have been members of University of the Third Age for many years (Figure 4).

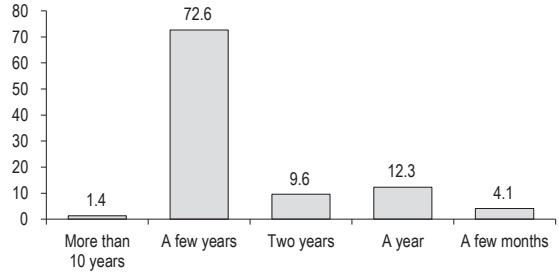

Figure 4. The duration of education at University of the Third Age (%)

Results

The first question group referred to the respondents' past lifestyle. As seen in Figure 5, the most numerous group of respondents claimed they had led an active lifestyle – 50.7%, and 33.0% described their prior lifestyles as averagely active.

Among the respondents, 47.9% performed the so called 'mixed jobs', meaning they worked both in standing-up and sitting-down positions. Also, numerous was the group of people (41.1%) who performed a sitting-down only jobs (Figure 6).

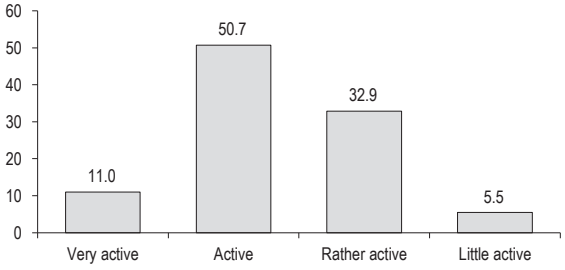

Figure 5. Participants lifestyles prior to the study (%)

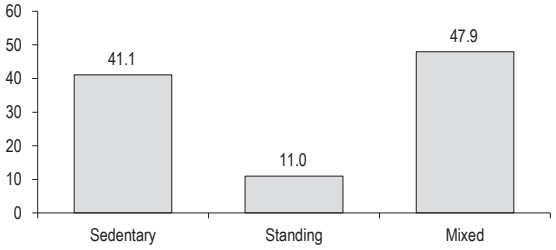

Figure 6. The kind of previously performed jobs (%)

As shown in the next figure, most (60.3%) of the respondents claimed to have had a proper nutrition and healthy diet (Figure 7).

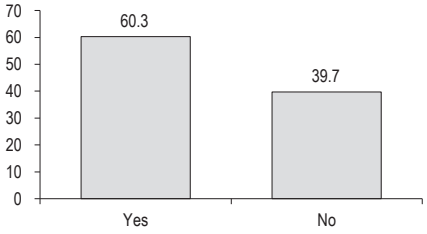

Figure 7. Proper nutrition level prior to the study (%)

One of the questions also referred to the frequency of actively spent free time. The biggest group of respondents (67.1%) claimed that they had been organizing their free time in an active way. In contrast, 9.6% and 17.8% used to spend their free time actively rarely and very rarely accordingly (Figure 8).

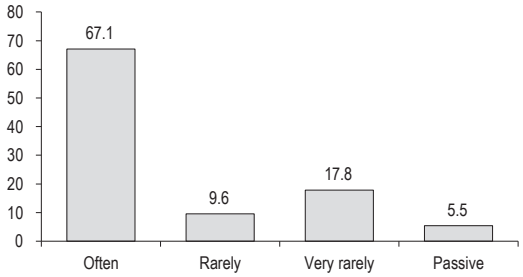

Figure 8. The frequency of actively spent free time (%)

The subsequent questions referred to the present behaviors of the participants. The results showed some pro-health behaviors of the respondents, with about 43.8% commuting by foot and 26.0% on a bike. Only one third of all the respondents used cars or public transport to commute (Figure 9).

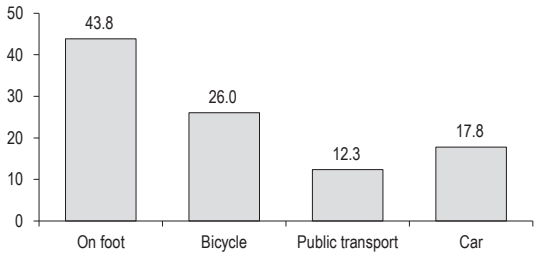

Figure 9. Most frequently used transportation (%)

How we spend our free time is an important component of a pro-health lifestyle. As visible in Figure 10, the participants organized their free time in various ways.

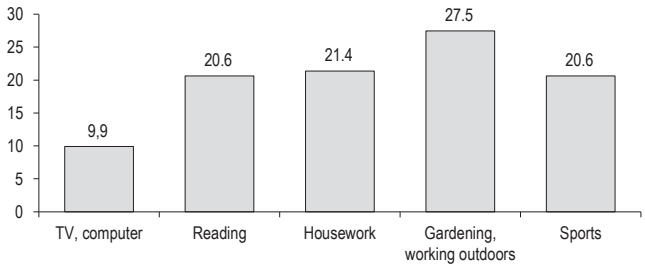

Figure 10. Ways of spending free time (%)

What seems to be satisfactory is the fact that the vast majority of the respondents (64.4%) declared undertaking physical activity few times a week, and 21.9% of them – daily. There were only 4.1% of people who were hardly ever or never active (Figure 11).

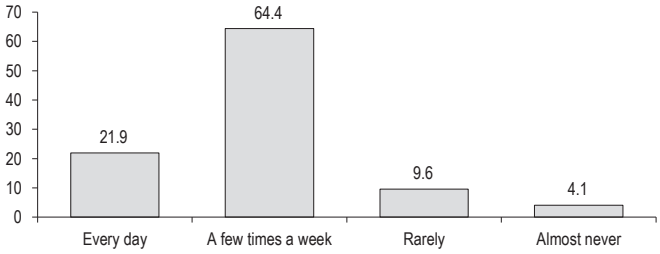

Figure 11. The frequency of undertaking physical activity (%)

As seen in Figure 12, the respondents have been undertaking different forms of physical activity – with the most frequent being: nordic walking, walking, and cycling.

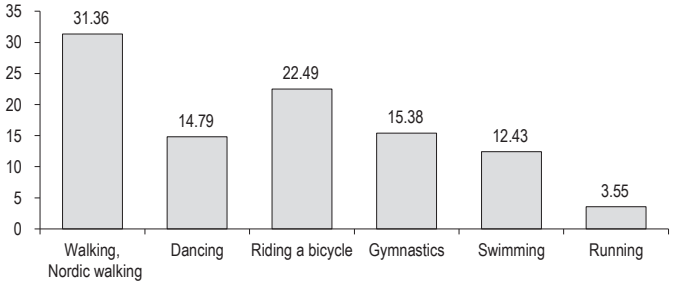

Figure 12. The most frequently undertook forms of physical activity (%)

The respondents gave two main reasons for undertaking physical activity: the improvement of body's functional efficiency (32.4%) and wellbeing (30.2%) (Figure 13).

By analogy, the questionnaire also included a question about reasons for not undertaking physical activity. What was satisfactory was the fact that 46.6% of the respondents concluded that there were no such reasons. By contrast, one fourth of the respondents claimed that bad health and lack of willingness were two major factors for not undertaking such regular activity. None of the respondents gave "the preference of passive rest or lack of necessary equipment as factors for not undertaking physical activity." (Figure 14).

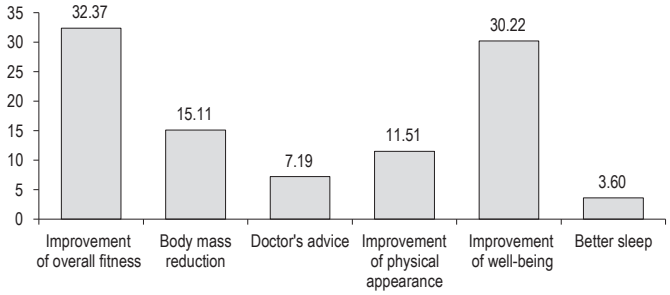

Figure 13. Reasons for undertaking physical activity (%)

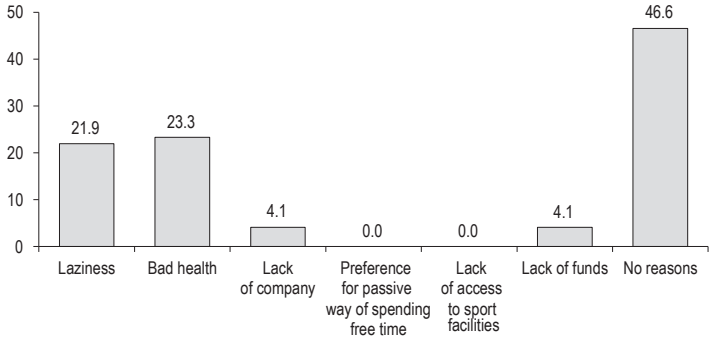

Figure 14. Reasons for not undertaking physical activity (%)

What is interesting, is the fact that despite the old age, as much as 86.3% of the respondents feel the need to take up physical activity (Figure 15).

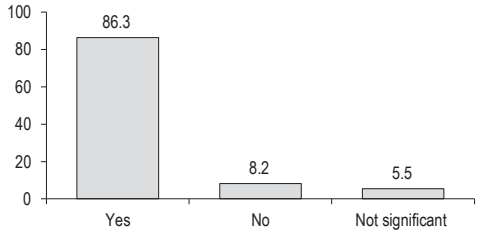

Figure 15. Individual need for taking up physical activity (%)

These results could be additionally explained by the fact that 58.9% of the respondents claimed to had used rehabilitation programs in rehabilitation centers (Figure 16).

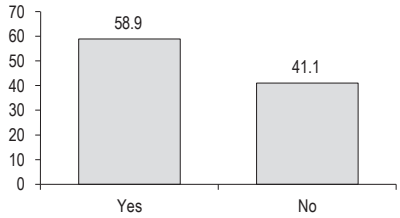

Figure 16. Use of rehabilitation services (%)

Figure 17 addresses the benefits of physical activity on one's health. Based on the studies results, 43.7% of the respondents recognized physical activity to be beneficial for overall health, and 36.0% considered exercise as the means to feel better.

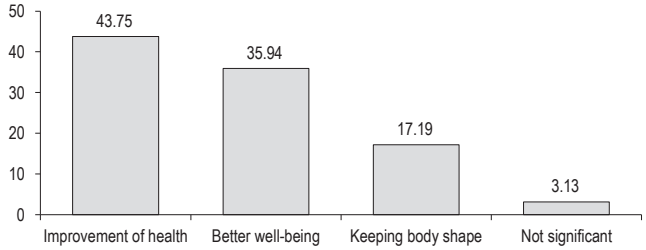

Figure 17. The most significant benefits of physical activity on health (%)

Conclusions and results

In recent years, we have observed an increasing interest with the aging process which is tightly intertwined with the increasing number of the elderly, and the increase of life expectancy with the sharply declining birth rate. With age, capabilities for undertaking physical activity are gradually decreasing, and recently emerging lifestyle changes have only escalated this phenomenon. Due to technical advancements of recent years, there has been a significant decrease in physical activity necessary to carry out household duties, commuting (cars, buses), or taking up recreational activities. According to data available, about 40–60% UE population lead a sedentary way of life. For healthy individuals aged 18–65, WHO recommends undertaking moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes 5 days a week, or, very intensive physical exercise for at least 20 minutes 3 days a week. Required physical activity dose can be compiled in at least 10-minute long rounds, and be a combination of both moderate and intensive intervals. It is also advised to include some muscle and endurance strengthening exercises 2 or

3 times per week. More or less the same goals, set for young and healthy persons, should be reached by people over the age of 65. What is also important for this age group, is strength training combined with balance-improving exercises, which together help prevent falls. The abovementioned directives are an addition to the routine everyday life activities, which are usually of mild intensity and last less than 10 minutes. However, presently visible dose-reaction correlation indicate that for the majority of sedentary-living population, even a small increase in mild or moderate exercise intensity may lead to some health-related benefits, particularly when the threshold of 30-minute moderate physical activity 5 days a week has not yet been reached. All target groups can take some additional advantage by increasing intensity (UE Physical Activity Guidelines. Applicable Political Actions Supporting Physical Activity Benefiting Health. A Fourth Consolidated Project Approved by UE Working Groups „Sport and Health" at the meeting on 25th September, 2008).

The final findings of the research study show that the adult learners of University of the Third Age are mostly women (82.2%), aged 60–69, with secondary or higher education, of correct body weight, professionally active in the past (100.0%). Evaluating their claims concerning pro-health behaviors in the past, it is clear to see that the majority had preferred an active rest. What is more, the respondents claimed to have had a healthy diet routine and commuted by foot. It is supposed, however, that locomotive frequency was often connected with the residency of respondents. Responding to questions about the present lifestyle, the majority of respondents declared (65.0%) regular physical activity few times a week, with the most frequent and one of the most popular sports nowadays: nordic walking and cycling. Asked for the reasons behind taking up physical activity, the respondents pointed to health care, well-being, and mental relaxation – all rules of a healthy lifestyle. Giving reasons for not taking up physical activity, only one person of all the respondents pointed to poor health and lack of enthusiasm. Presented here studies allow to conclude that physical activity is beneficial for health. The conclusion drawn is that the examined elderly led a pro-health lifestyle, which is a very positive trend, taking into account the fact that the life of the elderly is not merely a prolonging process of disability stage, but is rather responsible for making this process shorter, and postpone it to the very last years of one's life (Franceschi et al. 2000). This may be due to the fact that adults attending classes at University of the Third Age are the ones who are still willing to live an active life. It is also worth remembering that factors such as education level, urbanization, or job type, play an important role in taking up systematical physical activity. It is noteworthy that the prolonging of the physical activity period and pro-health lifestyle of the elderly allow other younger persons to fully benefit from their long-life experiences (Kałka et al. 2007). Old age period is as an important stage in one's life as any other, and that is why, it is necessary to reconsider the issue in terms of care settings for older people in the broadest sense of the word.

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Wytyczne UE dotyczące aktywności fizycznej. Zalecane działania polityczne wspierające aktywność fizyczną wpływającą pozytywnie na zdrowie. Czwarty projekt skonsolidowany zatwierdzony przez grupę roboczą UE "Sport i Zdrowie" na zebraniu w dniu 25 września 2008.

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