



## Perception towards Physical Exercise among University Students in Malaysia: A Medico-social Problem

### KEYWORDS

Perceptions, Barriers, Physical exercise, University students

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### ABSTRACT

*It is well documented that the vast majority of chronic disease may be prevented if there is daily physical activity. The objective of this study is to explore the practice and barriers toward physical activities among university students in Malaysia. The study was conducted among fifty students from the Management and Science University Malaysia. In-depth interviews were conducted among the participants. The study has revealed that the majority of the respondents exercise regularly. Despite that the majority of the participants have mentioned that they do exercise regularly, "no time to do exercise", "busy" and tight study schedule represent the main barriers towards physical activity. The data obtained in this study may be used in order to identify specific activities and programs that would promote physical activities in universities. There is also urgent need to further educate students about the benefits of physical exercises.*

### Introduction

There is evidence that physical activity, and dietary choices are the most important modifiable determinants of cancer risk<sup>[1]</sup>. It is also well documented that when daily physical activity of one hour is performed in combination with a natural food diet, high in fiber which contain fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and naturally low in fat, containing abundant amounts of vitamins, minerals, and phyto-chemicals, the vast majority of chronic disease may be prevented<sup>[2]</sup>.

Regular physical activity remains an important behavior for promoting health, postponing or preventing prevalent musculoskeletal disorders such as mechanical low back pain, neck and shoulder pain and decreasing the risk of developing coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis, obesity and colon cancers<sup>[3]</sup>. There is link between sedentary lifestyle and osteoporosis, obesity, depression, and to the staggering death rates from coronary heart disease, type II diabetes, and colon cancer. Participation and maintenance of regular physical activity was recognized as one of the most important health behaviors in preventing the onset or reducing the severity of many chronic diseases. Physical activity has been consistently associated with enhanced the quality of life<sup>[4]</sup>. Physical activity is important to maintain young people health. Children and adolescents who participate in higher levels of physical activity are less likely to display risk factors for cardiovascular disease<sup>[5]</sup>. However, there are many factors that affect participation in physical activity; included demographic variables, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about physical activity<sup>[6]</sup>. With unprecedented global increases in the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity<sup>[7]</sup>, there is an urgent need for effective physical activity programs to reduce the incidence of overweight and obesity among young adult. Therefore the objective of this study is to explore the practice and barriers toward physical activities among Malaysian university students.

### Methodology

In-depth interview qualitative study was conducted in February of the academic year 2011 among 50 students from the Management and Science University (MSU), Shah Alam, Malaysia. Simple random sampling was conducted among university students from different faculties. The participants invited to a convenience place such as library, café to conduct the interview. The protocol of this study was approved by the research and ethics committee of the Management and

Science University (MSU), Malaysia. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the in-depth interview began. Students were interviewed by a trainee students. The main themes discussed during the in-depth interview were: understanding of physical activities; practicing physical activities; barriers towards physical activities; and the benefits of physical activities. The data obtained were classified into various categories and analyzed manually.

### Results

The majority of the participants were Malay, from urban areas and with a normal weight (84%; 82%; 58%; respectively), table1.

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (n = 50)**

Variable	Categories	Number	Percent
Sex	Female	25	50
	Male	25	50
Race	Malay	42	84
	Indians	5	10
	Chinese	0	0
	others	3	6
Resident area	Rural	9	18
	Urban	41	82
BMI	Underweight	10	20
	Normal weight	29	58
	Overweight	9	18

Majority of the respondents mentioned that – responding to question “what comes to your mind when you think of physical activity? – Exercises are the first things come to mind when think about physical activity. One of them said: “Of course the first thing is about healthy. When people do exercise it is called physical activity. Even dancing or walking, that would be considered as physical activity.” (Male, 22 years old, Malay).

Regarding the practice of exercise, most of the respondents have mentioned that they exercise regularly. As for the activities that promote good health; the participants have mentioned varieties of activities that promote good health such as regular exercise; dancing, healthy hobby and even - blood donation. The majority of them mentioned that regular exercise promoting good health. Few respondents have

mentioned that regular exercise is beneficial for stress management. Others have mentioned that dancing, balance diet, healthy hobby, and blood donation are the activities that promote good health.

Based on gender, the male participants were preferred to do jogging, soccer, and walking. Whereas favorites physical activity among females have been found to be walking, dancing, and jogging. As for the physical activities for leisure or fun the majority of the participants have mentioned the following activities: playing badminton, walking around and travelling.

Regarding the barriers towards physical activities, majority of the participants mentioned that there is no time to do exercise, followed by "busy and tight study schedule". One of them said: "The main barriers for me to not practices exercise are tight schedule and studies." (Indian, female, 23 years old). Few respondents have mentioned that online internet activities as a barrier.

Majority of the respondents have indicated that they well realize the benefits of physical activities in the maintaining of good health. One of them said: "Exercise would make you have good health, preventing from disease such as diabetes or heart attack." (Male, 22 years old, Malay). Few students have mentioned that physical activity prevents social problem and release tension.

It is known that physical activity can be classified into moderate and vigorous; moderate physical activity refers to activities equivalent in intensity to brisk walking or bicycling<sup>[1]</sup>. However, most of the students have indicated that they are not aware about this classification.

## Discussion

The results of the present study indicate a lack of knowledge among the students about the physiological basis and classification of physical activities into different types. Vigorous physical activity that produces increases in breathing or heart rate could be considered as a health hazard for students with health problems. The finding necessitates educating university students about health benefits of physical activities and about health hazards which could be involved in some circumstances.

Majority of the participants mentioned that they practice exercise regular. This may due to the fact that the analyzed group of participants (university students) has more knowledge about the benefit of regular exercise. Appropriate regular physical activity has been proved to improve psychological health and cardio-respiratory fitness<sup>[8]</sup>. In this study, "not having enough time" was the most prevalent barrier for not participating in physical activity among university students. Similar findings have been reported earlier by others<sup>[8-9]</sup>. Several studies reported that the limitation by "time-factor" has been the greatest obstacle amongst adolescent study participants<sup>[8-9]</sup>. It is well known that university study load, such as assignments, projects, extra curriculum activities, the need for social life and family support, the increase in various responsibilities, self-esteem, tiredness, or just the lack of interest determine the availability of time which can be potentially used for physical exercise.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the present study, the main reason for doing physical exercises was the need to maintain health. Among other reasons, girls indicated that they exercise because of weight issue and stress reduction; guys exercise for enjoyment and gains in muscle and strength. This finding is in accordance with the results of other study<sup>[11]</sup>, which reported that college women exercise for "psychological and body image benefits".

Despite of the existence of common belief that exercises are important in health maintenance, no previous studies focused on analyses of the perception and barriers for physical exercises in Malaysia. The present study performed as a survey of Malaysian student partially fills the gap in our knowledge about this problem.

## Conclusion

The present study has revealed that despite the majority of the survey participants mentioned that they do exercises regularly, the reasons such as "no time to do exercise", "busy" and tight university schedule represent the main barriers towards physical activity. There is urgent need to educate university students about the benefits of physical activities. The data obtained in this study may be used in order to identify specific activities that may be preferred by both genders that can be targeted in physical activity promotion programs developed for university students.

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