

# WellSpring

## Filling the Need: The Importance of Hiring Exercise Professionals

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When you hear the words “exercise professional,” what do you think of? Are you not quite sure what makes an exercise professional “professional”?

The truth about exercise professionals is that they are much more than the gym-related stereotypes we might think of. And now, more than ever, we need their expertise—not only in gyms and fitness centres, but also in hospitals and health care centres, workplaces, schools, and more.

### What an Exercise Professional is

Before explaining why we need exercise professionals in such a wide variety of settings, let’s set the record straight about what an exercise professional actually is.

#### What's in This Article for You?

- What an Exercise Professional is
- Why We Need Exercise Professionals
  - in Health Care
  - in Workplaces and Schools
  - in Other Settings
- Certifications for Exercise Professionals and What They Mean
- How to Make an Exercise Professional Part of Your Organization



Often described as personal trainers, exercise professionals are committed to the study and practice of exercise science and passionate about getting people to be more active.

They are well-educated in physical activity, kinesiology (the study of human movement), fitness, and health. They hold a college diploma or a university degree in kinesiology, physical education, or human kinetics, and they are certified with a professional association of their peers.

They are competent in a range of skills including:

- assessing health and fitness levels
- prescribing exercise
- designing physical activity programs targeted specifically for their clients’ needs
- counselling for lifestyle changes that increase physical activity

Their areas of knowledge include:

- anatomy and physiology
- physical activity
- fitness programming for people of all ages and abilities



- exercise science
- health promotion
- behaviour change and motivation
- effects of prescription drugs on the body (e.g., blood thinners, antidepressants)

## Why We Need Exercise Professionals

Most of us know that we should be physically active. Regular physical activity prevents and alleviates health problems (1), improves our mental health (2) along with our physical health, and increases our quality of life (3).

However, many of us are not active enough. A recent survey of the Alberta population found that only 58.5% of Albertan adults reported doing enough physical activity to receive health benefits (4). And physical activity statistics are similar for the rest of Canada (5).

In the modern world, it seems that physical activity does not just happen, or else everyone would be doing it. Because of the sedentary nature of modern-day life, physical activity needs to be planned, managed, and sustained. Fortunately, there are qualified people to help us do this: exercise professionals.

## Why We Need Exercise Professionals in Health Care

Doctors and other health care professionals know that physical activity is an important ingredient in the health of their patients. Even patients with serious medical problems can benefit from physical activity. For example, physical activity helps to lessen the effects of chronic diseases (1).

Unfortunately, many health care professionals do not promote, prescribe, or counsel their patients on physical activity as much as they would like (6).

Many physicians and other health care providers have indicated that a lack of knowledge about prescribing physical activity is a barrier to counselling their patients on how to be physically active (6, 7, 8).

They have also indicated other barriers such as a lack of time (6, 7, 8).

Because of the sedentary nature of modern-day life, physical activity needs to be planned, managed, and sustained. Fortunately, there are qualified people to help us do this: exercise professionals.

Because of these barriers, exercise professionals need to be employed in health care. Just as other specialists—dietitians, mental health practitioners, surgeons, and many others—play key roles in the care of patients, so too should exercise professionals.

We're already seeing this change in the health care field, but there is still much work to do in making exercise professionals a regular part of health care teams.

## Why We Need Exercise Professionals in Workplaces and Schools

Two more settings that benefit from having exercise professionals on staff are workplaces and schools, more and more of which are recognizing the importance of promoting physical activity (9, 10).

Physical activity programs in workplaces offer unique benefits. For example, employees may enjoy increased morale and productivity and miss fewer workdays (11). More and more organizations are recognizing these benefits and hiring exercise professionals to design and carry out workplace physical activity programs.

Schools are also beginning to hire exercise professionals. Kids stand to benefit from physical activity just as much as adults, and like adults, many of them are having trouble being active enough (5). Kids need physical activity to grow and develop properly (12), and kids who are physically active tend to do better in school (13).

Teachers, like physicians, don't always have the knowledge or time to provide effective, safe physical activity programs. Fortunately, exercise professionals can help.

Depending on the school's goals, some exercise professionals work directly with the kids, some reach out to the parents and community as well, while others also focus on the staff.

## Exercise Professionals in Other Settings

Health care centres, workplaces, and schools are just some of the places where exercise professionals are filling new roles. As well, exercise professionals in fitness centres are branching out, working closer with workplaces, schools, the health care field, and community initiatives.

Here are some of the other settings where exercise professionals are working (including the more traditional ones):



- Recreation and fitness centres
- Older adult housing facilities
- Child care facilities
- Community programs
- Public services such as the police and the army
- Health promotion sector

## Certifications for Exercise Professionals and What They Mean

How can employers determine which exercise professionals are qualified? In addition to looking at education and experience, a key way to ensure that you are hiring qualified people is to ask about their certifications.

In Canada, the highest level of certification for exercise professionals is provided by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP). CSEP offers two certifications: Certified Personal Trainer (CPT)<sup>™</sup> and Certified Exercise Physiologist (CEP)<sup>™</sup>. At the time this article was published, there were about 360 CPTs and 440 CEPs in Alberta alone.

### CSEP CPT (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology Certified Personal Trainer)

The CSEP CPT has completed at least a college diploma or two years of a university degree in a relevant field. Their coursework must have included anatomy, physiology, psychology, and exercise prescription. They must also have a minimum number of hours of supervised practical

experience, and they must pass both a written and a practical exam.

CSEP CPTs are equipped to provide lifestyle counselling (e.g., how to stay motivated about exercising), fitness assessments, and physical activity programs. They are often found on the front lines of facilities working as personal trainers and as part of corporate wellness teams.

### CSEP CEP (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology Certified Exercise Physiologist)

Like CSEP CPTs, the CSEP CEP must gain a minimum number of hours of supervised experience before being certified, and they must pass both a written and a practical exam. They have also taken courses in specific areas to qualify for their certification.

The difference is that CSEP CEPs have a higher level of education: a minimum of a university degree in a relevant field. And in many cases, they also complete additional educational training.

CSEP CEPs also have a larger scope of practice than CPTs. For example, CEPs are qualified to work with people who have medical conditions, functional limitations, or disabilities. They are also qualified to handle more clinical and health service roles.

## How to Make an Exercise Professional Part of Your Organization

So how can these professionals help you? Could one of them join your team and help your organization reach new goals? Could you partner or collaborate with an exercise professional? Could they fill a gap you've been struggling with? Could they provide a service to your employees, clients, or patients?

If you'd like to know more about exercise professionals:

- Contact the Provincial Fitness Unit of Alberta. They coordinate all CSEP certification in Alberta and have an online directory of Alberta-based exercise professionals and CSEP-accredited facilities.
- Contact CSEP directly to learn more about their certifications.
- Talk to other businesses and organizations that have hired exercise professionals. Don't know any? Contacting CSEP or the Provincial Fitness Unit of Alberta is a good way to learn which organizations have exercise professionals on staff.

- Talk to recreation and fitness facilities. You'll learn more about services in the community that are already established and how you might collaborate with the exercise professionals on staff.
- Go to workshops, events, and conferences that involve physical activity, exercise, and fitness. And bring the decision-makers in your organization with you. You'll learn more about the field and make some great connections.
- Talk to exercise professionals themselves, and find out what they can do for your particular organization.
- Advocate for the importance of physical activity expertise at your organization. You know the evidence, you understand the importance, now strive for change.

If you're an exercise professional:

- Get certified with CSEP!
- Once you're CSEP-certified, register in the Provincial Fitness Unit of Alberta's online directory (if you're based in Alberta). Hundreds of Albertans check this site every month to find qualified exercise professionals.
- Attend conferences and networking opportunities outside the physical activity field to make new connections and spread the word about the roles you can play.
- Make cold calls to businesses and organizations that might need you. They may be looking for someone just like you.
- Talk to other exercise professionals; learn how they got to their position.
- Keep your certifications current. CSEP requires you to take continuing education and professional development to maintain your certification.
- Advocate, advocate, advocate. This is an important profession, and you know it! Share this wherever you may go.

## References

References are available on the Alberta Centre for Active Living website.

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## Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of all people through physical activity.

### IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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