The Alberta Centre for Well-Being has biennially conducted a survey of the physical activity behaviour of Albertans since 1993.

This year the sampled population was categorized according to stages of physical activity. The popularity of the stages of change variable, a component of the Transtheoretical Model, has been evident in initiatives to promote behavioural change. The stages of change variable has also been used to describe the current physical activity status of populations.

Knowledge of the distribution of Albertans across the stages of physical activity allows us to identify target groups for appropriate interventions, and provides a format for tracking the effectiveness of such interventions.

Methodology
The sample consisted of 1,202 adults aged eighteen years-and-older. Three separate sub-samples were drawn representing Edmonton, Calgary, and the remainder of the province. A random-digit dialing approach was used to ensure that respondents had an equal chance to be contacted whether or not their household was listed in the telephone directory. The survey took place during December 1998 and January 1999.

Information on demographics, current leisure-time physical activity (defined as 3 or more times per week, 20 minutes or more each time), past activity, and intention to participate in future physical activity were collected. Frequency and intensity of exercise were also surveyed.

Fifty-eight percent of the total number of valid households responded to the survey. While the results of the age and gender breakdowns can be taken as an adequate reflection of the overall Alberta population, further division into sub-groups within the sample does not necessarily represent the Alberta population. Therefore, prudent generalization of these findings to the overall population is advised.

A four-step categorical algorithm was used to categorize the sampled population into six stages: Precontemplation, does not currently exercise and does not intend to in the next six months; Contemplation, does not currently exercise but is thinking about beginning to exercise in the next six months; Action, currently exercises regularly but has for less than six months; Maintenance, currently exercises regularly and has for more than six months; Relapse-Precontemplation, does not currently exercise, has participated in the past six months, but has no intention to participate within the next six months; Relapse-Contemplation, does not currently exercise, but has participated in the past six months with intention to participate again within the next six months.

Results and Discussion
More than half of the sampled population has maintained a physically active lifestyle for the past six months. Including those people in the Action stage, approximately 60% of those surveyed were currently active. The percentage of people in the Maintenance stage has increased significantly since 1995 from 44% to 54%.

While there are a greater percentage of females in the Contemplation stage, more males are in the Maintenance stage. Also, a gradient can be observed across both income and education. A greater percentage of those at the low end of these indicators are less active and less likely to be active in the future, than those at the higher end of these indicators.

One of the strongest trends over the past six years has been the degree to which older Albertans report being physically active. Compared to 1995, significantly more seniors (55+ years old) currently report being in the Maintenance stage, 47% now vs. 35% in 1995. In addition, this age group also demonstrated a decrease in the Precontemplation stage from 34% to 22%. No significant differences are observed between 1997 and 1999 for this age group.

As observed in 1997, this elevated involvement in continuous physical activity may demonstrate the success of programs targeting seniors and information campaigns about the benefits of physical activity in preventing osteoporosis, heart disease and other ailments. It’s also likely that this group of Albertans is more positively predisposed to leading a more active lifestyle than their peers of ten or even five years ago.

Summary
While we are encouraged by the fact that more than half of the Alberta population is maintaining an active lifestyle, and that seniors are showing high rates of participation, there are areas for improvement. Approximately 25% of the population are...
sedentary and of them, 60% have no intention of becoming active.

Finally, in light of the fact that social economic status appears to be a factor influencing physical activity participation, recent policy initiatives proposed by the Alberta Active Living Strategy, and public health campaigns such as Canada’s Physical Activity Guide for Healthy Active Living need to be evaluated within a health determinants framework.

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References

