

Viewpoint

The role of fitness trainers in combating sedentary lifestyles

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Extract

The role of fitness trainers is crucial in reducing the burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) associated with physical inactivity and sedentary lifestyles. The importance of regular physical activity in improving general health outcomes is widely acknowledged worldwide. Despite this fact, one-third of adults and four-fifths of adolescents still do not adhere to these recommendations. In Pakistan, the role of fitness trainers in disease prevention is highly relevant where NCDs such as diabetes are highly prevalent. Unfortunately, the fitness industry is one of the neglected industries of Pakistan with limited professional growth opportunities, uncertain career paths, low pay employment, and a shortage of certified fitness trainers who can barely meet the community's healthcare needs in combatting sedentary lifestyles. To maximize the impact of this industry, there is a dire need for stronger partnerships between fitness professionals and healthcare service providers, in addition to the integration of disease management and preventive health training modules into certification programs. Thus, fitness trainers equipped with the required skill sets can play a significant role in improving the public health outcomes of the general population.

Keywords

Fitness trainers; Noncommunicable diseases; Public health; Sedentary behavior

Physical activity is beneficial for health and well-being. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 150 minutes of moderate- and 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity per week are recommended for adults, whereas 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity are recommended for adolescents daily [1,2]. These recommendations are crucial in addressing the global surge in noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), such as hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cerebrovascular strokes, associated with physical inactivity and sedentary lifestyles, which are major contributors to mortality [3,4]. A sedentary lifestyle in individuals involves waking behaviors with an energy expenditure of 1.5 metabolic equivalents (METs) or lower, typically associated with prolonged periods of sitting, reclining, or lying down [5].

Globally, more than one-third of adults and four-fifths of adolescents fail to meet the recommended levels of physical activity [6]. The physical activity profile of Pakistan is consistent with global statistics, with 85% male and 89% female adolescents and 24% male and 43% female adults reporting being physically inactive [7]. Moreover, in Pakistan, cardiovascular disease is the major contributor to 60% of all deaths due to NCDs, while the country ranks third in the world in terms of the highest age-adjusted diabetes incidence [7,8,9]. This situation emphasizes the need for public health interventions to promote exercise and an active lifestyle, which can marginalize the economic burden of NCDs on individuals as well as the healthcare system [10].

To address this issue, the fundamental need is to maintain the optimal level of physical activity to eradicate the sedentary lifestyle among the general population. Notably, the fitness industry of Pakistan has expanded over the years, with an annual growth rate of 0.69%, and is projected to capture the market volume of US\$2.07 million by 2029 [11]. This is an opportunity for fitness trainers, who can play a significant role in improving the health outcomes of people visiting fitness facilities such as gyms, wellness centers, fitness and health clubs, sports complexes, and boutique fitness studios [12,13].

Despite the potential role of fitness trainers, the fitness industry has not yet explored their full potential to address public health needs. Fitness trainers are expected to take various roles, including teachers, coaches, nutritionists, and counselors; however, many of them lack the formal training needed to effectively address clients' complex healthcare needs. The gap between the educational qualifications of fitness trainers and the demand for their services has raised serious concerns about their credibility, professionalism, and safety standards in industry [14].

The literature suggests that fitness trainers often face challenges such as limited professional growth opportunities, uncertain career paths, low pay employment, and unclear roles, all of which contribute to high turnover rates in the industry [15]. Despite several challenges, fitness trainers, which are key resources for promoting physical activity, are considered frontline workers for fighting against NCDs such as hypertension and obesity [16]. However, their contribution in the field of public health can be improved significantly by giving them recognition, providing enhanced support, arranging professional training, and defining their role in health promotion.

Collaborations between fitness trainers and healthcare providers such as doctors, physiotherapists, pharmacists, nurses, and dietitians could be a holistic approach to promote the health and wellbeing of the population [17]. For example, tailored exercise programs can be devised for individuals with specific health conditions, such as diabetes or heart disease. Similarly, the role of fitness trainers is not limited to physical health but also includes mental well-being, which is integral to overall health. Fitness trainers can also collaborate with mental health practitioners, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors, to design programs that address anxiety, depression, and stress and promote mental well-being [18]. Therefore, collaborative integration of fitness trainers into public health initiatives could increase their role in disease prevention [19].

To utilize the full potential of fitness professionals in improving public health, there is a dire need for stronger partnerships between fitness trainers and healthcare service providers, in addition to the integration of disease management and preventive health training modules into certification programs. By equipping fitness trainers with the skills to address challenges such as diabetes and obesity, they can contribute to reducing the disease burden, particularly in countries such as Pakistan [20]. Moreover, it is crucial to make substantial investments in their training and provide them with formal recognition within public health systems. Finally, collaborative efforts between fitness trainers and healthcare providers can devise a more effective approach to disease prevention and health promotion, ultimately enhancing global well-being.

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