

10 tips for a healthier society among an obesity epidemic

More than half of the adult population in OECD countries is overweight or obese. A report by IESE's José Ramón Pin offers tips to get Spain more active.



November 13, 2014

Physical exercise increases quality of life, prolongs life expectancy and improves

psychological well-being. And the benefits don't end there: physical activity is also good for the economy. Active and fit societies have lower healthcare expenses, higher productivity and lower employee absenteeism rates.

Focusing on Spain, IESE's **International Research Center on Organizations (IRCO)** -- in collaboration with health consultancy Ingesport, through the GO Fit Observatory -- presents a [study](#) suggesting that fitness policies should be less fragmented and more focused on increasing efficiency. To reach these conclusions, the authors look to "good practices" and data from other Western nations, especially those in the European Union.

The study, overseen by IESE's [José Ramón Pin](#), the [José Felipe Bertrán Chair of Government and Leadership in Public Administration](#) and director of the IRCO, argues that Spain still has ample room to improve its promotion of physical activity.

A more competitive economy

In Europe, obesity directly accounts for an estimated two to four percent of total health spending. Based on this data, the study puts forward that "one euro invested in promoting sports creates an estimated savings of 50 euros in health care spending over the course of 15 years."

Sports is already a huge business, accounting for two percent of the world's GDP. The sports industry has created jobs, even in the midst of the financial crisis, with 160,000 jobs in the sector in Spain. The report sees more room for growth.

The 10 pillars of a healthy society

Statistics show that 44 percent of the Spanish population does not engage in sports or physical exercise at all. Pin argues that increasing the number of people involved in sports and fitness should be a national priority. The report outlines a series of recommendations to achieve this:

1. *Conduct an economic study.* The United Kingdom pinpointed the costs that a sedentary lifestyle has on a nation's economy; Spain needs to do the same.
2. *Promote a unified national strategy.* Promoting physical activity as beneficial to health with the support of social and political leaders helps ensure its success.
3. *Involve all areas of society.* The healthcare, education, private and public sectors need to

back the new initiatives, and city councils and country officials need to take on more prominent roles in promoting ambitious health policies.

4. *Foster public-private partnerships.* Getting the government and private businesses to work together would help eliminate misgivings and provide clear and transparent legal support for such collaborations, especially those relating to the construction and management of sports facilities.

5. *Develop a strategy for sports tourism.* This is an area with enormous potential, which has grown by 67 percent in recent years with a 40 percent increase in related spending in Spain.

6. *Reduce the VAT or sales tax.* In Spain, a mere 17 percent of those who engage in sports-related activities are members of sports clubs or gyms. The numbers in Denmark and Sweden are 50 percent and 55 percent, respectively. Reducing the taxes applied to accessing and using private sports services and facilities could boost this number.

7. *Consider tax breaks.* Hungary gives tax breaks to businesses that build or renovate sports facilities.

8. *Create a lottery.* Earmark funds raised by this lottery for promoting healthy physical activity. Most European countries already have such a system in place.

9. *Establish a model for financing healthy physical activity.* In Sweden and the United Kingdom national health system physicians can prescribe physical activity with public funding.

10. *Consider deals with premier-level sports.* These can be used as a means of financing sports at lower levels.

The report bases its findings and recommendations on data from comparable countries, which has shown that investing in sports positively impacts society and promotes economic competitiveness.

Despite progress made in the arenas of health and sports in recent years, Spain still faces challenges in promoting physical exercise. As with other nations in the developed world facing similar challenges, it is more important than ever for Spain's government, businesses and individuals to work together.

www.iese.edu/insight