

Vital Signs of a Health Revolution

Canadians today are among the world's healthiest people. With an average life expectancy of 80 years for women and 73 years for men, Canada ranks among the top 10 nations. But Canadians are also becoming healthier in the broader sense of the term.

In the past, when infectious disease was the predominant cause of illness, health was defined as the absence of disease. By the mid-1900s, however, medical science had significantly reduced the incidence of such infections: chronic disease, disability and the stress of contemporary living became the major health problems in Canada. In turn, health came to mean more than simply freedom from illness. It was redefined as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. This new approach also recognized that health was influenced by a range of interrelated factors: human biology, lifestyle, and social, economic and physical environments.

Out of this new understanding of the subject grew an innovative approach to health care, known as health promotion — a process that encourages people to increase direct control over and improve their health. It represents a mediating strategy between people and their environments, synthesizing personal choice and social responsibility. In practical implementation, it fosters self-care and healthful personal lifestyles, takes steps to discourage the onset of disease and disability,

develops sound public policy on health, and creates social and physical environments conducive to good health. Thus individuals, the medical sphere, the private sector, communities and government all play a role in health promotion.

A New Lifestyle

Less than 20 years ago, Canadians were among the world's least fit people. Yet today Canadians number among the most physically active and fit people in the world.

During the winter, British Columbians head for the exhilarating Rocky Mountain ski slopes, while Canadians on the prairies strap on a different type of ski for the challenge of cross-country skiing. In the early morning hours joggers reclaim Montreal's streets from the traffic, while on the east coast, swimmers, surfers and sailors enjoy the Atlantic waters.

The Canadian fitness trend has been supported by the public and private sectors alike. In 1971 the federal government together with

high-risk practices as poor nutrition, smoking, and alcohol and drug abuse. For example, cardiovascular disease, accounting for one-third of all deaths annually, is the leading cause of death in Canada. The fitness trend has been an important first step in combatting it. And together the medical profession and government are also educating Canadians about the relationship between high-fat diets and heart disease. In part because of these and other initiatives, the number of Canadian women aged 25 to 74 dying from heart disease has decreased by 40 per cent over the past two decades, while the ratio for men has dropped 30 per cent.

The new understanding of the importance of diet and nutrition is evident elsewhere. Individual Canadians are eating less and adopting healthier diets. Health food stores are booming; more and more restaurants offer special selections for health-conscious clients; and nutrition lessons are now standard on school curricula.

Other major lifestyle changes are also revitalizing Canadians' health. Recognizing the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse, the government has launched aggressive campaigns against both to encourage responsible use of alcohol and freedom from drugs. The recently introduced National Drug Strategy addresses the problem of drug abuse through education and information programs, advertising, research into drug dependency, as well as enhanced



Photo: Four By Five Inc.

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The amazing turnaround is the result of a revolution in lifestyles. Physical fitness has become a top priority for Canadians. Across the country people are on the move — working out at fitness clubs, swimming, jogging, walking, cycling or swinging racquets.

business created Participation — a national agency promoting fitness and sport-for-all. The single, most important force behind the Canadian fitness revolution, Participation, with its emphasis on participation in fitness through physical activity, has influenced many aspects of Canadian life.

Health promotion also extends into other phases of Canadian lifestyles, reducing such