ACSM Policy Brief: Federal Physical Activity Guidelines

Physical Activity as a National Challenge
One of the gravest health challenges facing our nation is the rising prevalence of obesity and physical inactivity in the U.S. population. Studies by the Department of Health and Human Services indicate that 68 percent of adults and 16.9 percent of children of the United States are obese or overweight, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that poor diet and physical inactivity cause more than 400,000 deaths each year. The link between the rise in obesity and ballooning increases in health care spending could not be more apparent. High rates of obesity underlie disturbing increases in chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease, and more. Seventy-five cents of every dollar spent on health care goes toward treating chronic diseases.

One common-sense way to combat obesity and rising health care costs is to promote physical activity by ensuring that Americans of every age and physical aptitude – and their health care providers – are well informed about the types and amounts of physical activity that people should perform to gain important health benefits.

Why Update the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans Now?
The 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), were designed to provide information and guidance on the types and amounts of physical activity that provide substantial health benefits for Americans aged six years and older. The main idea behind the Guidelines is that regular physical activity throughout the lifespan has been shown to produce long-term health benefits.

The current federal Guidelines were first issued in 2008. The rapidly evolving nature of our scientific understanding of the benefits of physical activity requires that these guidelines be reviewed and updated at least every five years, as is done with dietary guidelines. The scientific review process to complete this revision takes more than a year, so the Department of Health and Human Services should begin this process in 2011 to facilitate new guidelines being issued in 2013. By signing onto this letter, you will be urging the Department of Health and Human Services to begin this process.

Organizations Supporting Renewal and Revision of the Guidelines
FAQs about the Federal Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans

What is the benefit of revising these guidelines?
Regular review and updating of the Guidelines takes advantage of the latest science bearing on issues related to physical activity and health. This is important given the impact physical activity has on numerous chronic diseases (e.g., heart disease, type 2 diabetes, etc.), and its role in the prevention of weight gain that leads to overweight and obesity. Identification and promotion of new and proven approaches to increase participation in physical activity by all Americans is consistent with the emphasis on disease prevention. Furthermore, it underscores and demonstrates the commitment of the federal government to promote public health through successful physical activity programs at in schools, communities and workplace settings. Finally, the 2008 U.S. Physical Activity Guidelines have shaped physical activity and exercise recommendations not only in the U. S., but also across the world. Regular updates of these Guidelines will help maintain this leadership role.

What scientific changes can be expected in the revised guidelines?
The revision process includes a thorough review of research published since the original Guidelines were published. Topics likely to be changed by significant new findings include:

- The role of physical activity and exercise in preventing and treating chronic diseases.
- Dose/response considerations (i.e., how much physical activity is needed to achieve desired health outcomes such as preventing weight gain over time, reducing the prevalence of type 2 diabetes, etc.)
- Effects of physical activity and exercise on metabolism and weight management in already overweight and obese individuals
- Impact of physical activity programming on children and older adults.
- Ways to reduce risks associated with doing physical activity and exercise

How will they be used by health care providers?
With a growing understanding of the manifold health benefits of physical activity and exercise, health care providers in the United States and worldwide are prescribing activity for their patients, both to prevent and treat a wide variety of chronic diseases. Up-to-date federal Guidelines allow physicians and other health care providers to make recommendations based on the latest science and evidence. The Guidelines are a foundation document and an essential tool for everything from community health programs to educational curricula to the National Physical Activity Plan.

What will it cost?
Scientists involved in the 2008 review process have estimated that it will cost substantially less than $500,000 (the previous estimated cost for the 2008 issuance), and perhaps as little as $250,000 to renew and reissue the Guidelines, as many of the databases and scientific review procedures to complete the process were developed in 2008 and will only need updating, not creation from scratch.