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BRIEF NOTE

Physical activity and the transition from school to university: A cross-sectional survey among university students in Germany



L'activité physique et la transition de l'école à l'université : une enquête auprès d'étudiants allemands

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Summary

Introduction. – The transition from school to university may be accompanied by different changes in lifestyle. We aimed to investigate whether students' physical activity (PA) differs between school and university and which role change of residence plays.

Summary of facts and results. – We analyzed data on 689 university students (69.5% female; mean: 22.7 years). The majority changed PA compared to school (less: 45.4%, more: 36.5%). Among those who were at the beginning of their studies and those who changed residence for the start of studies, the proportion of individuals having reduced PA was higher compared to their reference groups of students in higher semesters and students having not changed residence, respectively. Students visiting their hometown more frequently and staying there during semester break were more likely to have reduced PA.

Conclusion. – Students who changed residence for starting studies seem to be a vulnerable group future intervention campaigns should focus on. Supporting those students to stay physically active during studies may be important to help them starting an active and healthy work life after graduation. Additionally, freshmen at universities may need more support to have the opportunity to stay physically active.

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MOTS CLÉS

Enseignement
secondaire ;
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Activité physique ;
Transition vers
l'enseignement
supérieur ;
Style de vie

Résumé

Introduction. – La transition de l'école à l'université peut être accompagnée par des changements de mode de vie. Nous avons cherché à déterminer si l'activité physique des étudiants diffère entre l'école secondaire et l'université et quel est le rôle joué par ce changement de lieu de vie.

Synthèse des faits et résultats. – Nous avons analysé les données de 689 étudiants (69,5 % de femmes ; âge moyen : 22,7 ans). La majorité des étudiants a changé son niveau d'activité physique en comparaison avec l'école secondaire (moins : 45,4 %, plus : 36,5 %). Parmi ceux qui débutaient leurs études et ceux qui ont changé de lieu de résidence pour aller à l'université, la proportion de ceux qui ont réduit leur activité physique était plus élevée que chez les étudiants plus anciens à l'université et chez les étudiants n'ayant pas changé de lieu de résidence. Les étudiants qui rentrent chez eux plus fréquemment et qui y séjournent pendant les vacances étaient plus susceptibles d'avoir réduit leur niveau d'activité physique.

Conclusion. – Les étudiants qui ont changé leur lieu de résidence pour leurs études supérieures semblent être plus vulnérables et devraient être la cible de futures campagnes d'intervention. Aider ces étudiants à rester physiquement actifs pendant leurs études peut être important pour les amener à adopter un style de vie sain et actif dans la vie professionnelle. En outre, les étudiants de première année à l'université peuvent avoir besoin de plus de soutien pour rester physiquement actifs.

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1. Introduction

Physical inactivity is a major risk for several chronic diseases. Therefore, regular physical activity (PA) during childhood and adolescence is not only important for good health in this age but also for good health in later life. However, previous research revealed that PA declines during adolescence and young adulthood. Besides physical, social, and psychological changes which occur during this time, structural changes may exist that influence barriers and motivation for PA [1].

One important structural change in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is the start of postsecondary education [2]. Becoming independent from parents, moving out of home, searching for new friends, and facing a new set of responsibilities as well as a higher workload can characterize this step in education [1,2]. These new circumstances may influence PA: Previous studies revealed a decline in PA between high school and college [3].

However, this decline has to be investigated in more detail. It may be helpful to know when the change in PA exactly takes place to enable researchers and professionals developing tailored intervention strategies. Previous research indicated that the start of studies may be crucial to the decrease in PA [3]. One aspect that was not considered in previous research is the change of residence for the start of studies. However, residency and its structural determinants may be related to PA. Therefore, our aim was to shed some light on these aspects in analyzing data on university students.

2. Methods

The analyses are based on the Nutrition and Physical Activity study (NuPhA), a cross-sectional online survey in university students in Germany (31 October 2014–15 January 2015). The students from all over Germany were recruited via

fliers, mailing lists, social networks, and lectures. Among the participants, 40 gift cards (20 × 25 €, 20 × 50 €) were raffled off. All participants gave informed consent. The study obtained ethics approval by the Medical Ethics Committee, Medical Faculty Mannheim, Heidelberg University (2013-634N-MA).

We asked whether PA differed between the last years at school and today. Besides gender and semester (grouped into 1–3; 4–5; 6–9; ≥ 10), we included information on change of residence due to studying (yes/no). If students changed their place of residence, the following characteristics were included into our analysis: distance to hometown (tertile split: ≤ 100 km; 101–245 km; ≥ 246 km), frequency of visiting hometown (at least every other weekend; about once a month; less than once a month), residence during semester break (hometown/place of study), and personal living conditions (living alone; with partner; shared apartment; rooming house or others).

We used Chi²-tests to identify potential associations. For the identification of potential target groups for intervention, we conducted tree analysis. A *P*-value < 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.

3. Results

Six hundred and eighty-nine students from all over Germany participated in the study (69.5% female; mean age: 22.7 years). About three quarters (74.2%) changed residence for their studies and averagely settled down about 269 km away from home. Among these, one third (30.5%) visits their families at least every second weekend during the semester, another third (31.3%) about one time per month, whereas 38.2% visit their families less often. Most of these students (57.1%) spend their semester break in their hometown.

Eight of ten students reported a change in PA compared to secondary school (Table 1). While 36.5% stated that they are more physically active today, 45.4% indicated being

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