

Community programs to promote an active lifestyle: Lombardy's "Walking Groups"

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Lombardy region has a population of over 10 million, 30% of which lives with a chronic condition. To face this problem homogeneously covering the whole area, guidelines from the Regional Prevention Plan 2014-2019 (PRP) have been disseminated. These guidelines follow efficacy, integration, inter-sectorality and sustainability criteria. Within the PRP plan, a strategy for "promotion of healthy lifestyles in the community" was foreseen. Through synergies with the healthcare system, local administrations and voluntary associations, this strategy aims to the development of actions to promote active lifestyles especially focusing on the most vulnerable targets of the population.

Within this more general strategy, an action that has proven to be successful and is recognized as evidence based and equity oriented is that of the so called "Walking groups". It represents an opportunity to increase physical activity in the population. Up to now, 840 walking groups are active in Lombardy, involving over 27.000 people. These groups of people, mostly aged over 65, meet twice a week to walk together. Participants are recruited in different ways: spontaneous subscription, advertising by municipalities and associations, by word of mouth or targeted invitation by general practitioners or specialists in case of people with particular risk factors. At the beginning groups are lead by healthcare professionals and then gradually become autonomous thanks to the training of voluntary "walking leaders". Groups have the added value of promoting socialization among participants, thus enhancing active engagement and users' involvement that end up fostering the group itself contributing to the sustainability of the initiative. Future steps will go in the direction of promoting the program in younger age-groups, with a life-course approach that takes into account the spreading of chronic conditions also in younger populations.

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