

## Should the Commonwealth Games come with a health warning?

Written by Keith Parry, Senior Lecturer in Sport Management, Western Sydney University

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Governments [often justify](#) spending money on sports events like the Commonwealth Games because they leave a “ [legacy](#) ”, including increases in physical activity among the population.

But the experience of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics and the 2012 London Olympics show [this is not the case](#) . After the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow [physical activity among Scottish adults actually decreased](#) .

In fact, the increased television and online coverage of major sports events encourages people to spend long periods in front of screens, which [may have a negative impact on health](#) .

### Turn on, tune in 24/7

Sport is deeply ingrained in many societies, particularly Australia. Yet, despite enduring images of Australia as a “ [sporting nation](#) ”, it is one of the [fattest nations on earth](#) .

Aussies definitely enjoy watching sport. In one survey, [43% of Australians](#) aged 15 years and over reported attending a sporting event in the previous 12 months.

Sport dominates [television viewing habits](#) . In 2017, [76.8% of Australians](#) aged 14 years and over watched some form of sport on TV.

During the 2016 Rio Olympics more than [18 million Australians watched some part of the event](#) , taking in 325 million minutes of coverage and an additional 73.8 million social video views.

The screens of the host broadcaster and online channels delivered a total of 20.7 billion minutes of coverage during the Rio Olympics.

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So it seems we are primed for the [hundreds of hours](#) of Commonwealth Games coverage on television and online across the 11 days of competition.

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But the federal government's [physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines](#) encourage Aussies to reduce the amount of time they spend in front of the screen, in an attempt to reduce overall sedentary behaviour.

A [2017 study](#) in the Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine found that binge viewing was associated with "poorer sleep quality, increased fatigue and more symptoms of insomnia".

Another recent study found that higher levels of television viewing are [associated with](#) increased risk of death from diseases including Alzheimer's disease, diabetes and kidney disease.

The good news is that participation in regular [physical activity](#) can reduce the risks of mortality associated with [high television viewing time](#).

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The Australian government, through the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), [invested A\\$340](#)

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[million](#) to provide Australian Olympians with the best chance of success in Rio.

In addition, high-performance funding to sports was A\$101.6 million in 2017-18, with \$55 million for the high-performance programs featured at the Gold Coast Games. Funding [focusing on sports participation](#) is less than a quarter of this amount.

Australia is not alone in its obsession with national sporting success. Despite the billions the United Kingdom spent on the London Olympics and Paralympics and the Rio Olympics and Paralympics, sports participation [has remained relatively stable](#) since 2008.

This level of funding for elite sport may be better invested in grassroots programs and physical activity initiatives. It could help lower the cost of participation in sport or physical activity – Australians spend A\$10 billion per year [on fees alone](#) .

Attending the Games in person may be healthier than watching on television as some degree of activity is required to navigate to and around the venues. However, spectators will still be largely sedentary during events and are [likely to eat unhealthily while they are there](#) .

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**Read more:** [\*\*Research Check: will binge-watching TV increase your risk for Alzheimer's disease and diabetes?\*\*](#)

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The rapid development of sports media and the increasing availability of sport on televisions and mobile devices have serious implications for the nation's health.

In Australia, adults spend an average of [39 hours](#) per week in sedentary activities. Television viewing is the most commonly reported sedentary activity with around 13 hours per week spent

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in front of the box.

Australians shouldn't boycott sport spectatorship altogether. But, at the very least, spectators (and those watching at home) should be encouraged to take part in activity breaks during lulls in action. Perhaps it is time for spectators to be warned of the risks to their health.

*Emma George has received funding from the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs and ClubsNSW to support research into health and community engagement initiatives delivered through sport.*

*Keith Parry does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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