

New survey evidence on the health and well-being of England's older generation

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Many people aged 65 and over lead healthy and active lives, but others of their generation face severe health challenges as they get older.

According to the latest Health Survey for England, nearly two in three adults in this age group suffer from high blood pressure, roughly one in four is obese, and over a quarter of women and more than a fifth of men have symptoms of depression.

Health researchers from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and UCL (University College London) have conducted a comprehensive national survey, interviewing and testing thousands of people, including 4,000 aged 65 and over. Key findings from the Health Survey for England 2005, which is published today, include:

General health and diet

- More than half of both men and women aged 65 and over report that their health is 'good' or 'very good' (57 per cent of men and 55 per cent of women). The proportions are higher for those with higher incomes.
- 71 per cent of this age group suffer from a longstanding illness. 42 per cent of men and 46 per cent of women said that this illness limited their activities in some way.
- On average, older people eat just fewer than four portions of

fruit and vegetables per day. Less than a third consume the recommended 'five a day'. Fruit and vegetable consumption is highest in London and the South East.

Disease

- Although rates of cardiovascular disease are falling, this remains the main cause of death in England. Prevalence of the disease increases with age and it is still the most common chronic disease among men aged 65 and over. Disease rates are highest in the North East of England in both men and women.
- Arthritis is the most common chronic disease overall among adults aged 65 and over, reported by 32 per cent of men and 47 per cent of women.
- Prevalence of untreated hypertension (high blood pressure) in this age-group is lowest in London and highest in the North East. The prevalence of well-controlled hypertension was highest in London for both sexes and lowest for men in Yorkshire and Humberside, and for women in the East of England. Hypertension is a major predisposing factor for stroke and heart disease.

Disabilities

- 37 per cent of men and 40 per cent of women aged 65 and over report having more than one functional limitation: seeing, hearing, communicating, walking or using stairs.
- Fewer men than women aged 65 and over have mobility

problems (39 per cent of men, compared with 47 per cent of women). By the age of 85 and over, two-thirds of men and nearly three-quarters of women have mobility problems.

Mental health and social support

- 4 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women aged 65 and over report having emotional, nervous or psychiatric problems. Researchers believe that these problems may be significantly underreported.
- 28 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men score highly on scales monitoring depression. Depression is twice as common among those aged 85 and over.
- 18 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women report having a severe lack of social support from friends, family or community groups. Levels of contact with friends and family are more likely to be low among men. Those with the lowest incomes are the most likely to experience severe lack of social support, the lowest levels of contact with friends and are more likely to view their local area negatively.

Income and deprivation

- There are significant inequalities according to income and area deprivation, as well as regional variations in health patterns. There are many instances where people with lower incomes are generally in poorer health than those who are more affluent.

Dr Jennifer Mindell, Clinical Senior Lecturer in UCL's Department of

Epidemiology and Public Health and an editor of the study, said:

"This survey is an essential means of monitoring the health of the general population to inform national health priorities and policy. It raises pertinent questions, for example, why the proportion of older people with hypertension that is well-controlled differs so much by region.

"Many people aged 65 and over have very good health, but a large proportion are living with chronic diseases. Yet again, we have found that people with lower incomes are generally in poorer health than those who are more affluent. We need to know and do more to improve the poor mental health and the reported lack of social support networks of a substantial proportion of this age group."

Rachel Craig, Research Director for the Health Survey for England at NatCen, and co-editor of the report, added:

"Innovative new measures in this year's survey – such as the Geriatric Depression Scale and tests of physical performance – give us new insights into the life and health of older people and the difficulties some of them face. The results are of practical importance for policy-makers – for instance, a quarter of women cannot walk fast enough to cross the road in the time available at a pelican crossing."

Source: University College London

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