

# Italian immigrants live longer

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Although immigrants from Italy and their offspring form one of the largest demographic groups in Switzerland, there are hardly any studies on their state of health and risk of mortality. In a first for Switzerland, Silvan Tarnutzer and Matthias Bopp from the University of Zurich's Institute of Social and Preventative Medicine calculated unbiased mortality risks for people with an Italian migrant background.

## Immigrants from Italy live longer than Swiss people

Compared to Swiss people born in Switzerland, immigrant Italians exhibit a [mortality risk](#) that is roughly ten percent lower. Younger male Italians especially fair better than the Swiss, although the differences become increasingly smaller the older they are. At first glance, this finding is astonishing as Italian immigrants often only have a low school education and below-average income – both factors associated with higher risks of [mortality](#). The greater prevalence of smoking and overweight people and poorer assessment of one's own health in Italy compared to Switzerland also point in the same direction. On a behavioral level, this is merely counteracted by the [Mediterranean diet](#) – the frequent consumption of fish, fruit, vegetables and olive oil – and the distinctive social network. First author of the study Silvan Tarnutzer thus assumes that the lower risks of mortality can primarily be put down to the so-called "healthy migrant effect", according to which particularly healthy and bold people often migrate while weaker and ill people do not even start looking for a job abroad in the first place or, in the event of illness, return to their country of origin.

## Next generations at greater risk of mortality

As far as the offspring of migrants born in Switzerland are concerned, however, this [head start](#) disappears. The lifestyle of the host country influences Italians from subsequent generations during their personal development and they detach themselves from the healthy southern lifestyle and close-knit family network. For instance, Italians born in Switzerland display a 16 percent greater risk of mortality than locals. "Presumably as a result of the double burden of poorer educational opportunities and a more unfavorable lifestyle," says co-author Matthias Bopp. Interestingly, women seem to be affected by this unfavorable risk constellation to a lesser degree. "Due to their large number and on average younger age, the male offspring of Italian [immigrants](#) constitutes a special target group for prevention and the promotion of health," concludes Tarnutzer.

**More information:** Tarnutzer S, Bopp M for the Swiss National Cohort Study Group. Healthy migrants but unhealthy offspring? A retrospective cohort study among Italians in Switzerland. *BMC Public Health* 2012,12:1104. [doi:10.1186/1471-2458-12-1104](https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-12-1104)

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