

Health behaviors accumulate and remain relatively stable throughout middle adulthood, study finds

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According to a recent study, either healthier or unhealthier health behaviors cluster among individuals. These health behavior patterns

remain relatively stable in middle adulthood and are predicted by several sociodemographic and personality characteristics.

In a study conducted at the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences and Gerontology Research Center in Finland, it was observed that health behaviors are interrelated in such a way that individuals who are the least physically active also consume the most alcohol, and a significant portion of them also smoke. Healthier behaviors were similarly interrelated.

"Smoking, [alcohol consumption](#), and physical activity are often investigated separately in studies, but our study approach takes into account that each of us engages in multiple health behaviors simultaneously," says doctoral researcher Johanna Ahola from the Gerontology Research Center and Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences.

The study followed the same individuals when they were 42 (2001), 50 (2009), and 61 years old (2020–2021). Health behavior patterns are relatively stable throughout middle adulthood, although particularly [positive changes](#) were observed during the 19-year follow-up period. The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Psychology & Health*.

"The results are in line with previous studies. It was particularly encouraging to observe favorable behavior changes," says Ahola.

"Smoking decreased significantly during the follow-up period, which may be related not only to age but also to the prevailing societal circumstances. It can also be speculated that with the increased incidence of diseases in middle adulthood compared to earlier ages, general health precaution and health-related goals may become more important, leading to changes in behavior."

Sociodemographic characteristics are reflected in health behavior

patterns. Women, those who were married, held a degree, and were white-collar workers were more likely to engage in healthier behaviors. Similarly, those characterized by higher conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness, as well as lower neuroticism and extraversion, were also more likely to adopt healthier behaviors.

"Examining [personality traits](#) in the health behavior patterns brought a new perspective compared to prior research," says Ahola. "It has been previously observed that individuals characterized by high extraversion are more physically active than those scoring low in the trait. For a [physical activity](#) researcher, it was surprising that, in this study, low extraversion was associated with healthier behaviors."

More information: Johanna Ahola et al, Stability in health behavior patterns in middle adulthood: a 19-year follow-up study, *Psychology & Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/08870446.2024.2316676](https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2024.2316676)

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