
Physical health

Interactive readings “Men’s health situation: addressing men’s lack of understanding of their health problems”

➤ Introduction

Men in the EU generally experience inequality in the sphere of health. These interactive readings aim to increase men's understanding of their health problems, to raise awareness of the factors that are detrimental to men's health and wellbeing, and finally to motivate men to acquire knowledge and skills that would help to improve their health and well-being.

In this topic, the goal is to understand the concept of health, to analyse how it is linked to physical activity and to reflect on some key facts about health for men.

➤ What does “being healthy” mean?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being.

A healthy state of being involves the ability to:

- adapt
- build strength and resilience
- effectively manage life's challenges (physical, mental, and social)

In this sense, being healthy is more than just not having an illness or something broken.

➤ How do men perceive their health in the European Union?

Self-perceived health is an important factor to understanding men's relation with their health. It is important to highlight that feeling healthy differs from being healthy.

Often, men perceive their health better than women. According to Eurostat from 2024, in the European Union, 65% of women think their health is good compared to 71% of men. At the national scale, we can find the same patterns:

- In Ireland, both 80% of men and women perceive their health as good
- In Greece, 81% of men see themselves as healthy against 75% of women
- In Austria, 68% of men see themselves as healthy against 66% of women
- In Lithuania, 55% of men see themselves as healthy against 45% of men

➤ Key facts and statistics: the gender gap in health

Even though a higher percentage of men than women perceive themselves healthy, key data and statistics show that women in the European Union are actually healthier.

On average, women in the EU are expected to live until 84.1 years of age, which is 5.2 years more than men, at 78.9 years, according to a study by Eurostat from 2024. This gender gap can be higher or lower at the national level:

- In Ireland, the gender gap is 3.36 years
- In Austria, the gender gap is 4.48 years
- In Greece, the gender gap is 5.1 years
- In Lithuania, the gender gap is 8.64 years

According to the WHO's 2024 European Health Report, 22% of men in the European Region are likely to die from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) before their 70th birthday, compared with 11% of women. Those NCD's are one of the leading causes of death in men. They include cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory disease.

Those elements show that men's perception of their health is incorrect, creating major issues in their relationship with health and weakening their motivation to be healthier.

➤ How does physical activity impact health?

Sport and physical activity have long been known to promote health. This is because staying active has many advantages:

- It reduces the risks of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), which are directly linked to higher mortality rates and overall decreased quality of life.
- It helps to maintain muscle mass, flexibility, and mobility as the body ages.
- It boosts sexual health and performance.
- It reduces symptoms of mental illness.
- It slows down memory loss and cognitive/thinking problems over time.

Moreover, sport helps individuals connect with people too, by making them feel more included in their community, build relationships, and share that sense of belonging with others. Physical activity also builds a sense of autonomy or the feeling that one is in control of his life and body, and adds real purpose to his days.

Those benefits are multiplied when people manage to find a physical activity they truly enjoy doing, as it can be easier to create long-term exercising habits.

On top of that, the WHO states that increasing physical activity across the EU could save as much as €8 billion in health-care costs for everyone through lowering medical bills, taxes, and overall strain on the health system. This means investing in exercise, be it by sports, walking, or just moving more, which are all essentially free, could pay off for one's own wallet.

In 2018, the WHO recommended increasing physical activity to a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week. Their study shows that it would prevent 11.5 million new cases of NCDs by 2050 (including 3.8 million cases of cardiovascular diseases and more than 400, 000 cases of cancer).

In conclusion, men are often unaware of their health and this reduces their life expectancy and overall quality of life. Physical activity is one of the main solutions for men to promote their health and reduce the gender gap.

Questions

Question 1: Being healthy is:

- a) not having any illnesses
- b) having a balanced diet and exercising every day
- c) a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being

Correct answer: c)

Explanation: Being healthy is not just a physical state or a lifestyle, it is an accumulation of multiple factors which should not be neglected.

Question 2: Physical activity only benefits physical health.

- a) true
- b) false

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: Physical activity is not only good for the body and for preventing diseases, it is also great for one's mental health and can also have a positive financial impact (by reducing health-care cost in the long term).

Video

YouTube video : "How playing sports benefits your body ... and your brain - Leah Lagos and Jaspal Ricky Singh"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmFQqjMF_f0

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