
Men's risk taking and health seeking behaviour

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

I - Health seeking behaviour

➤ Understanding Health-seeking Behaviour in Men

Health-seeking behaviour describes how individuals perceive health problems, decide whether action is necessary, and use available healthcare services.

In the European context, men's health-seeking behaviour differs significantly from that of women, particularly in terms of timing, frequency, and type of healthcare use. Indeed, men are consistently less likely to seek help early, especially for preventive care and mental health concerns. This pattern is not primarily due to lack of access to healthcare systems, but rather linked to behavioural, cultural, and psychological factors.

Men often delay seeking help until symptoms become severe or persistent, which can increase the likelihood of complications and reduce the effectiveness of early treatment. It contributes to a broader gender health gap.

➤ The Perception of Health: “Being Fine as Long as I Function”

A key factor shaping men's health-seeking behaviour is how health itself is defined. Many men perceive themselves as healthy as long as they are able to work, perform daily tasks, and maintain their roles in family and society.

Health is therefore often equated with the absence of visible illness, the physical functionality and the ability to continue working. But this perception leads to a critical gap: early symptoms such as fatigue, stress, or mild pain are not interpreted as health problems requiring attention. Instead, they are seen as normal aspects of everyday life and men tend to act only when symptoms become severe, persistent, or disruptive to daily functioning.

This can lead to the issue that health problems are frequently addressed later in their development, when intervention is more complex and outcomes are less favourable.

➤ Age Differences in Health-seeking Behaviour

Health-seeking behaviour is not static as it changes significantly across the life course.

Younger men (15-30 years) often perceive themselves as healthy and invulnerable, even when engaging in high-risk behaviour, leading to higher rates of injury related mortality. Their concern for their health is minimised and their health-seeking behaviour is generally lower than in other age groups.

In middle adulthood (30-55 years), health-seeking behaviour is influenced by competing demands such as work, financial responsibilities, and family life. While awareness of health risks may increase, actual behaviour often does not change accordingly: men delay medical consultations due to lack of time, perceived responsibilities, or the belief that symptoms are not serious enough. Stress-related conditions, including burnout and cardiovascular risks, become more relevant, yet are often under-recognised. Help-seeking is triggered by family rather than internal motivation.

With increasing age, health-seeking behaviour generally improves. Older men are more likely to have regular contact with healthcare systems, often due to chronic conditions or more frequent health problems. The shift often occurs relatively late, meaning that many health issues have already developed or progressed. In addition, long-standing habits of delaying help-seeking may persist, particularly in relation to mental health.

➤ The Consequences of Delayed Help-seeking

The delay in health-seeking behaviour has significant consequences at both individual and societal levels.

At the individual level, it increases the risk of: late diagnosis and more complex treatment while reducing recovery chances and creating long-term health limitations. At the population level, it contributes to: higher rates of preventable disease, increased healthcare costs and inequalities in health outcomes.

➤ From Awareness to Behaviour Change

Improving health-seeking behaviour requires more than providing information. It involves changing how health is perceived, how risks are evaluated, and how decisions are made in everyday situations. This includes:

- recognising early symptoms as relevant
- reducing the threshold for seeking help
- normalising the use of health services
- integrating health into daily routines

Health-seeking behaviour is therefore closely related to the ability to assess risks, make informed decisions, and to act early is essential for preventing both chronic conditions and acute events such as accidents.

➤ Conclusion

Health-seeking behaviour is a central determinant of men's health outcomes in Europe. While healthcare systems are widely available, their use is shaped by individual perceptions, social norms, and life circumstances.

Across the life course, men's engagement with health changes from low awareness in youth, to delayed action in middle age, to increased use in later life. However, this progression often occurs too late to prevent avoidable health problems.

Addressing this gap requires a shift from reactive to proactive behaviour.

II - Risk-taking behaviour in men

➤ Understanding Risk-taking Behaviour in Men

Risk-taking behaviour is a central factor influencing men's health across Europe. It does not only refer to extreme or dangerous activities, but also to everyday decisions that increase the likelihood of physical or mental harm (e.g., excessive alcohol consumption, ignoring physical symptoms, working under unsafe conditions, or continuing activities despite fatigue).

Across Europe, research consistently shows that men are more frequently exposed to health risks and are more likely to engage in behaviours that negatively affect their wellbeing. These patterns are not simply individual choices but are strongly shaped by social expectations as masculinity is often associated with strength, endurance, and risk tolerance. As a result, men may normalise pain, delay seeking help, or underestimate potential dangers.

This creates a fundamental challenge: many health risks are recognised too late or not acted upon at all.

➤ Accidents as a Key Dimension of Risk-taking

One of the most visible and measurable consequences of risk-taking behaviour among men is the high number of accidents in which men are disproportionately affected. These occur in three major areas: the workplace, leisure activities, and road traffic.

➤ Workplace Accidents in Europe

Workplace accidents remain a major public health issue across the European Union. According to Eurostat, there were approximately 2.97 million non-fatal workplace accidents in the EU in 2022, alongside around 3,298 fatal accidents in 2023.

Men are significantly more affected than women. In the EU, around two-thirds of non-fatal workplace accidents involve men, and in the case of fatal accidents, the proportion is even higher, reaching over 90% in some datasets. This is partly due to occupational structures, as men are more likely to work in high-risk sectors such as construction, transport, manufacturing, and agriculture.

However, occupational exposure alone does not fully explain the difference. Behavioural factors also play a crucial role as accidents are often linked to losing control of tools, machinery, or vehicles, which frequently occurs in situations involving time pressure, fatigue, or risk-taking decisions. In many cases, safety procedures are known but not consistently followed.

Workplace accidents are often the result of a chain of decisions in which risks are underestimated or ignored.

➤ Accidents in Leisure Time

A large proportion of injuries in Europe occur outside the workplace, particularly during leisure activities (sports, recreational activities, and tasks such as home repairs or do-it-yourself work).

Leisure accidents are often associated with a different type of risk-taking. Unlike workplace risks, which are often linked to external demands, leisure risks are more closely connected to personal choices, performance goals, and social contexts.

Men are particularly affected by these patterns, especially in younger age groups. Risk-taking in sports or outdoor activities is often linked to identity, competition, and peer influence. While these activities can promote health, they also carry a higher risk of injury when safety is not prioritised.

Across Europe, injuries are among the most common causes of hospitalisation, with a significant proportion linked to accidents in everyday life and leisure contexts. This highlights the importance of preventive behaviour beyond the workplace.

➤ Road Traffic Accidents in Europe

Road traffic accidents represent one of the most serious health risks, particularly for younger men. In the European region, road crashes cause approximately 120,000 deaths and around 2.4 million injuries every year.

Road accidents are also one of the leading causes of death among adolescents and young adults. This makes them especially relevant for younger male populations, who are more likely to engage in high-risk driving behaviours.

Several behavioural factors contribute to this risk, like speeding, driving under the influence of alcohol, fatigue, or the use of mobile phones while driving. In addition, overconfidence in one's own abilities plays a significant role and research suggests

that men are more likely to overestimate their driving skills and underestimate risks, increasing the likelihood of accidents.

➤ The Behavioural Pattern Behind Accidents

Across workplace, leisure, and traffic contexts, a common pattern can be observed. Accidents are often preceded by a sequence of behavioural steps. First, a risk is present. Second, the risk is perceived as normal or acceptable. Third, no preventive action is taken. Finally, an accident occurs.

This pattern highlights the importance of early intervention. Changing behaviour at the stage of risk perception and decision-making can significantly reduce the likelihood of accidents.

➤ Generational and Life-phase Perspectives

Risk-taking and health-seeking behaviour vary across different stages of life.

Younger men are more likely to engage in visible risk-taking behaviours, particularly in traffic and risky sports, because of identity development, peer influence, and a sense of invulnerability.

In middle age, instead of visible risk-taking, the main issue becomes neglect. Fatigue, stress, and family responsibilities can lead to accidents, ignoring health signals and delaying medical care.

In older age, health risks are more closely linked to physical decline, chronic conditions, and reduced reaction time. Accidents such as falls become more common, and their consequences are often more severe.

➤ From Awareness to Action

Improving men's health is not only about knowledge, but about behaviour. Recognising risks is only the first step. What matters is the ability to act differently in everyday situations, including assessing risks realistically, making informed decisions, reducing harmful behaviours, and seeking help when needed. It also involves maintaining these changes over time, even in the face of setbacks.

➤ Conclusion

Across Europe, a significant proportion of health risks faced by men are linked to health behaviour. Workplace accidents, leisure injuries, and road traffic incidents illustrate how risk-taking and delayed action can lead to serious consequences.

At the same time, these risks are largely preventable. By improving awareness, decision-making, and health-seeking behaviour, it is possible to reduce accidents and improve overall wellbeing.

Questions

Question 1: Men usually start seeking help:

- a) When they are feeling unwell.
- b) When they experience persistent and serious symptoms.
- c) As a preventive measure during regular check-up.

Correct answer: b)

Explanation: Men often delay seeking help and often wait for their symptoms to become persistent and serious, which leads to bigger complications in the future.

Question 2: Why do workplace accidents affect more men than women?

- a) Because men are more prone to risk taking behaviours than women
- b) Because men work in more accidents-prone sectors than women
- c) Because men are more easily distracted than women

Correct answer: a) and b)

Explanation: Men are significantly more affected than women by workplace accidents because of an occupational exposure (they work in sectors in which there are more accidents) and a behavioural factor (safety procedures are known but not consistently followed and some accidents are caused by underrating risks or ignoring them).

Video

YouTube Video: "Men's Health: Where should you start – UT Health Austin"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlsYVnS35Fg>

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