HEALTH AND THE OLDER WORKER

While many older workers rate their health status as good to excellent, many also report that they have chronic conditions that affect well-being. Older adults are more likely to have disabilities that result in some limitations in their work-related activities. Older adults are less likely than younger workers to experience workplace injuries or illnesses, but take a few more days off from work to recover.

How do older adults rate their health status?

Surveys provide varying results about older adults’ self-reported health status. While an AARP survey shows about three-quarters of older adults rating their health as good to excellent, the NHANES survey shows only 13% of baby boomers reporting excellent health, a lower rate than the previous generation. MetLife reports that among 65-year-olds, 2 in 10 say their health is worse than 5 years ago.

In a 2012 survey, when adults aged 35-80 were asked “how would you rate your overall health,” the responses were relatively stable across all age groups. Among respondents aged 55-59, 76% rated their health as good to excellent, compared to 72% of those aged 35-39 and 65% of those aged 75-80. However, the reported number of serious medical conditions increases by age; for example, 65% of respondents aged 35-39 report having no serious medical conditions, compared to 25% of those aged 60-64.

According to a 2012 survey of Baby Boomers born in 1946 who turned 65 in 2011, “85% reported excellent, very good, or good general health ratings. Almost 2 in 10 report being in worse health than they were in 2008. Of those, half have suffered a major health problem in the past three years.”

Among respondents aged 46-64 at the time surveyed, “overall health status was lower in baby boomers, with 13.2% reporting “excellent” health compared with 32% of individuals in the previous generation,” according to a 2013 analysis of NHANES data. Note: Current boomers [surveyed 2007-2010] were compared to respondents who were age 46-64 when surveyed in 1988-1994.

What health issues and conditions are prevalent among older adults?

Older adults in the U.S. self-report that they have a variety of chronic conditions, hypertension being the most frequently reported (5 in 10), while 1 in 4 report other conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, cancer, obesity and back problems. While 1 in 10 older adults report frequent mental distress, this rate is similar to other age groups.

Among U.S. adults aged 50+, 51.2% report that they have hypertension and 44% report high cholesterol. Other prevalent chronic conditions that were self-reported include heart disease (22.3%), mental illness (21.3%), diabetes (18.8%), arthritis (17.4%), cancer (15.2%) back problems (14.5%) and COPD (14.0%), according to a 2011 analysis of data from the Medical Expenditure Panel survey.

According to a 2013 analysis of NHANES data, “obesity is more common among baby boomers—38.7% are obese compared to 29.4% of the previous generation... Regular exercise was significantly less frequent (35.0% vs. 49.9% exercise less than 12 times per month).”

Note: Current boomers [surveyed 2007-2010] were compared to respondents who were age 46-64 when surveyed in 1988-1994.

“Between 1981 and 2006, age-adjusted death rates for all causes of death among people age 65 and over declined by 21%. Death rates for heart disease and stroke declined by about 50%. Age-adjusted death rates for diabetes increased by 29% since 1981, and death rates for chronic lower respiratory diseases increased by 50%,” according to the Older Americans 2010 report.

“Among adults aged 55-64, 11.0% report frequent mental distress. Younger age groups report similar levels, ranging from 10.7% -11.7% between ages 18-54. Among adults aged 65-74 and 75+, under 7% report frequent mental distress,” according to a 2013 analysis by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
To what extent do older adults have disabilities that affect their work?

Among older workers aged 46-64, about 1 in 10 report having a disability*, almost twice as high as that for workers of all ages combined. The rate is slightly higher for those aged 55-64. Among those 65+, the rate is about 4 in 10. Among adults aged 65+ with a disability, the employment-population ratio is increasing and is now almost 7%; for those aged 16-64, the ratio is almost 30%. Work limitations, such as those caused by arthritis, may contribute to early retirement.

*Note: Disability refers to difficulty with one or more of four basic areas of functioning—hearing, vision, cognition, and ambulation.

To what extent do older workers experience work-related illnesses and injuries?

While workers age 65+ have the lowest rate of work-related illnesses and injuries, they require more time away from work to recover. Workers aged 45-54 have a somewhat higher rate of illness and injuries but shorter recovery time. The types of injuries also vary, with workers age 65+ having fewer sprains, but more fractures.

“Among persons age 65 and over with a disability, the employment-population ratio rose to 6.9% in 2012, while the ratio for persons ages 16 to 64 with a disability held at 27.0%,” according to a 2013 analysis of Current Population Survey data.5

“Approximately 47% of blue-collar workers aged 65 years and older had arthritis... 58% of service workers, 67% of farm workers, and 51% of white collar workers had arthritis... Blue-collar workers appeared to be much more likely to retire if they developed arthritis,” according to a 2011 analysis of national health data.6

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References


