

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.

1

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 60-64.¹

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."²

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 1988-1994.³

2

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.⁴

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 1988-1994.³

"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.⁵

"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.⁷

3

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.

Among respondents aged 46-64 at the time surveyed, 13.2% of baby boomers were “limited in work” compared to 10.1% of 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 1988-1994.³

“In 2010, nearly 6% of all workers reported a disability... Mature workers were more likely to have a disability. Among all mature workers the incidence of disability was 11.4%, nearly twice as high as the rate of disability among workers of all ages,” according to a 2012 analysis of data from the American Community Survey.⁸

“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.⁹

“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

4

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.

“In 2012, workers age 65 and older had the lowest incidence rate of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses” at 89 cases per 10,000 full-time workers, but they required the longest time away from work to recover, a median of 14 days. Workers ages 45 to 54 had the most cases of injuries and illnesses of any age group, with 293,700 cases in 2012. They also had the highest incidence rate, 121.7 cases per 10,000 full-time workers. Their median days away from work to

recover was 11 days, according to a 2013 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.⁹

“Older workers [age 65+] had a rate of sprains and strains that was 39 percent less than the average, but a rate of fractures that was 80 percent greater than the average,” according to 2009 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁰

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