

Men in Northern Ireland: Report 3 November 2004

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ARK is a joint project between Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster. Its aim is to make material on the social and political life of Northern Ireland available to the widest audience.

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The Men's Project within Parents Advice Centre aims to increase awareness of the issues facing local men and boys and to promote their social inclusion.

www.mensproject.org

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All reports are available online on the ARK and Men's Project websites.

Men's health

Key facts

- Half of men (54%) say that their general health is good.
- In 2001, 56% of men had good mental health.
- In 2001, 26% of men had a limiting long-standing illness.
- Men visit their GP and dentist less than women.
- In 2002-3, 27% of men smoked, compared to 39% in 1983.
- From 1986 to 2002-3, the proportion of men drinking above the recommended level of alcohol trebled from 11% to 33%.
- One third of men have taken illegal drugs at some time in their lives.
- In 2001, only one third of men had been physically active regularly for longer than six months.
- In 2001, 52% of men said they had experienced a stressful life event over the previous 12 months.

Men's health has become an increasingly researched topic in the last few years. Some writers have talked about a 'crisis' in men's health, often quoting figures based on life expectancy, mortality and morbidity. The first two of these topics are discussed in the first of this MINI series (Men's vital statistics). All figures in this report relate to men, unless otherwise stated.

Self-reported general health

The 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey found that just over one half of men aged 16 years or over (54%) assessed their general health as being good, 31% said it was fairly good whilst 15% thought it was not good (see Table 1). For women, the relevant figures were 51% good, 31% fairly good and 18% not good. Self-assessed general health was better for younger men than older men.

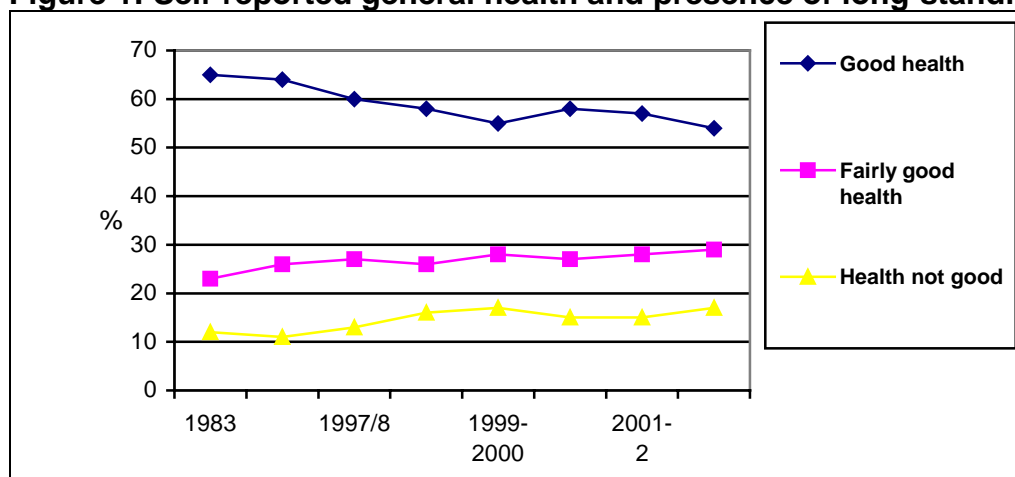
Table 1: Self-assessed general health by age group

	%							
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
Good	76	68	65	81	42	33	26	54
Fairly good	21	26	26	31	33	41	50	31
Not good	4	7	9	25	25	26	24	15

Source: 2001 Health and Social Wellbeing Survey

Data from the Continuous Household Survey yielded similar results, and also indicated that the self-reported general health of men aged 16 years or over has decreased over the past 20 years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Self-reported general health and presence of long-standing illness



Source: Continuous Household Survey

Mental health

One frequently used way of assessing mental health is the twelve-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ12). This consists of twelve questions to which respondents can indicate whether they feel *'better'* than recently, feel *'as usual'*, feel *'rather worse'* or feel *'much worse'*. The conventional way of reporting GHQ12 results is to categorise individuals by the number of items for which they reply *'rather worse'* or *'much worse'*. In some surveys, respondents who have not replied to any of the twelve questions with *'rather worse'* or *'much worse'* are then classed as *'happy'*, those who have replied to one, two or three questions in this way are classed as *'not depressed'* and those who have answered four or more questions in this way, are classed as *'depressed'*. Table 2 shows that just over one half of male respondents (56%) to the 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey can be described as *'happy'*, while 17% can be described as *'depressed'*. Men in the oldest age groups are more likely to be *'happy'* and less likely to be *'depressed'*.

Table 2: GHQ12 score by age group

	%							
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
'Happy'	57	57	50	54	56	63	60	56
'Not Depressed'	28	27	34	26	24	23	28	27
'Depressed'	15	16	17	20	20	14	11	17

Source: 2001 Health and Social Wellbeing Survey

GP visits

Table 3 shows that over the last 20 years, men have generally been more reluctant to visit their GP than women. This is despite the fact that figures from the 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey show that the proportion of men and women suffering from common conditions are very similar, for example:

- Asthma (females 11%, males 10%);
- Angina (females 6%, males 7%);
- Diabetes (females 2%, males 4%);
- Heart attack or other heart troubles (males and females 9%).

Table 3: Consultations with an NHS GP in the previous 14 days by age group

	%							
	1983	1991-92	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-1	2001-2	2002-3
Males								
16-44 years	6	9	8	9	8	7	8	10
45-64 years	13	16	13	16	17	16	14	18
65-74 years	19	21	19	17	23	23	23	27
70+ years	23	26	23	18	20	22	24	23
All males aged 16+	11	13	12	12	13	12	13	15
Females								
16-44 years	14	18	17	17	17	16	17	18
45-64 years	19	20	23	20	20	22	22	19
65-74 years	25	20	24	25	24	21	23	26
70+ years	21	24	27	25	22	22	21	26
All females aged 16+	17	19	20	19	19	19	20	20

Source: Continuous Household Survey

Disability

By the end of May 2003, 71,342 men in Northern Ireland were in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (Source: Department for Social Development). Results from the 2003 Labour Force Survey indicate that 20% of all men of working age had a disability. This figure was only 10% for 16-29 year olds, but 53% for 60-64 year olds.

One third of male respondents (33%) to the 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey said they had a medical condition which limited their physical activity, 26% suffered from a limiting long-standing illness and 10% said they had mobility difficulties (Table 4). All of these conditions were more prevalent among older respondents.

Table 4: Limiting longstanding illness, injury and disability by age group

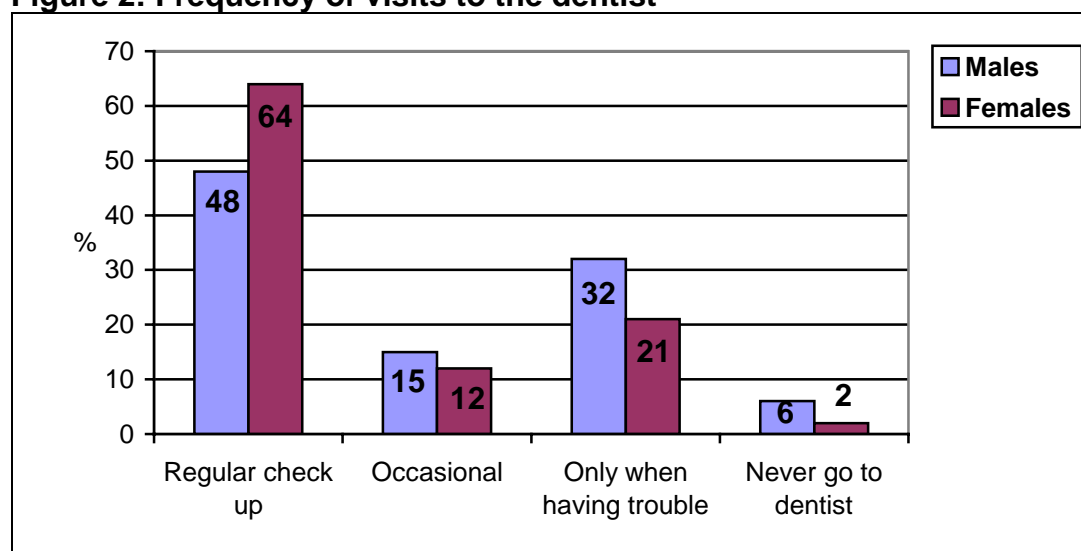
	%							
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
Men having an injury, disability or medical condition which limits their physical activity	10	21	23	36	45	52	60	33
Men saying they have a limiting longstanding illness	6	12	16	26	43	44	56	26
Men saying they have a mobility difficulty	1	2	4	7	14	19	30	10

Source: 2001 Health and Social Wellbeing Survey

Dental health

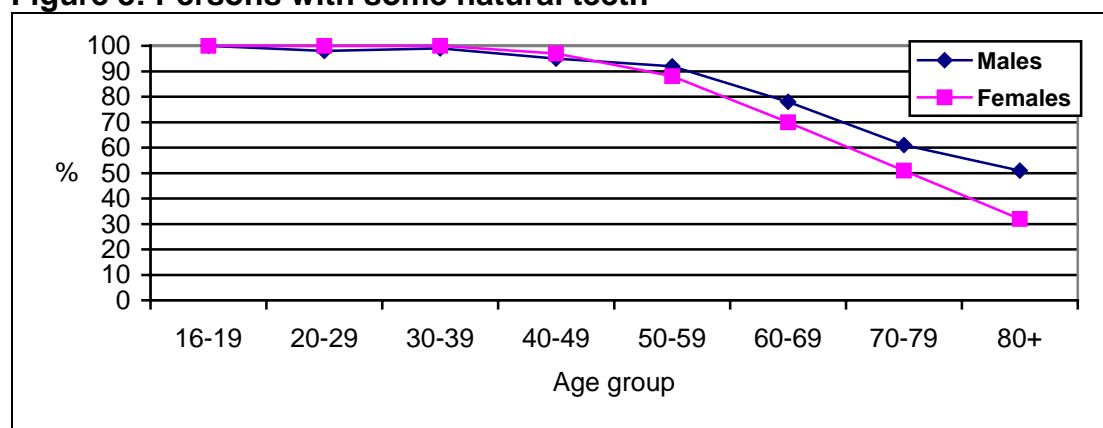
Results from the 2002-3 Continuous Household Survey show that men were significantly less likely than women to visit a dentist. Four out of ten men (40%) had not visited a dentist in 12 months or more. For men aged 50 years or over, this figure was even higher. While men in the youngest age group (16-19 years) were most likely to have visited a dentist in the previous 3-6 months (36%), one in five (20%) still had not been at the dentist for a year or longer. Men were three times more likely than women to say that they never went to the dentist (see Figure 2). Just under one half (48%) of male respondents went to regular check-ups compared to nearly two thirds (64%) of female respondents. However, men were still slightly more likely than women to have at least some natural teeth left when they were older (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Frequency of visits to the dentist



Source: 2002-3 Continuous Household Survey

Figure 3: Persons with some natural teeth



Source: 2002-3 Continuous Household Survey

Table 5 shows that dental health varies among men from different socio-economic groups, with professionals having the best dental health and unskilled manual workers having the worst.

Table 5: Dental health by socio-economic group (SEG)

	%			
	Registered with dentist		Having some natural teeth	
	1999-2000	2002-3	1999-2000	2002-3
Professional	93	89	97	97
Employer, manager	86	90	91	88
Intermediate non-manual	83	86	94	94
Junior non manual	88	86	92	91
Skilled manual	76	78	85	86
Semi-skilled manual	75	78	85	87
Unskilled manual	63	63	74	78
No SEG, refused, armed forces etc	86	90	98	96
All men aged 16 years or over	80	81	88	89

Source: Continuous Household Survey

Sexual health

The 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey asked respondents aged 16-44 years at what age they first had sexual intercourse and what form of contraception they had used. The survey also asked about attendance at a Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic. Table 6 shows that 89% of males had experienced sexual intercourse. Nearly two thirds of men had used contraception (most frequently a condom) during first sexual intercourse. Less than one in ten men (7%) had ever attended a GUM clinic.

Table 6: Sexual activity by age group

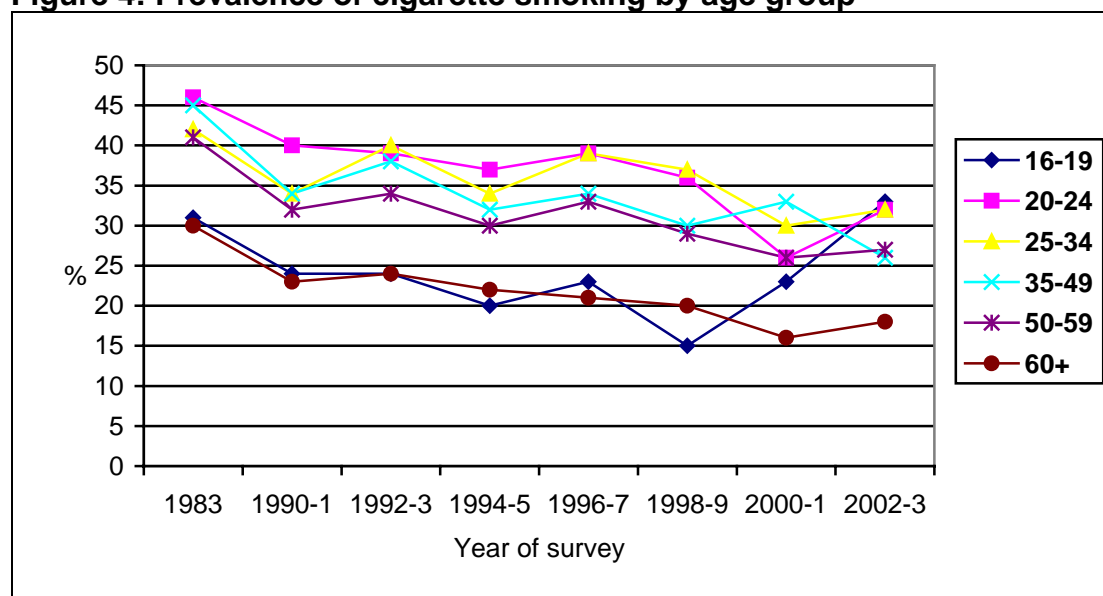
	%			
	16-24	25-34	35-44	All
Had sexual intercourse	69	96	98	89
Had first sexual intercourse before 16 years	20	20	14	18
Used any contraception during first sex	78	66	52	63
Used condom during first sex	50	60	39	50
Ever attended a GUM clinic	5	9	6	7

Source: 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey

Smoking

Data from the Continuous Household Survey show that the proportion of men smoking in Northern Ireland has decreased from 39% in 1983 to 27% in 2002-3. The only exception is within the 16-19 years age group, where the prevalence of smoking has increased. The biggest decrease in smoking was among men over the age of 50 years (see Figure 4). In contrast to this overall decrease among men, the prevalence of smoking in women has remained relatively stable at just over one quarter (29% in 1983, 26% in 2002-3). Table 7 shows that among different socio-economic groups, over twice as many semi-skilled workers smoke as do professionals (33% and 17% respectively).

Figure 4: Prevalence of cigarette smoking by age group



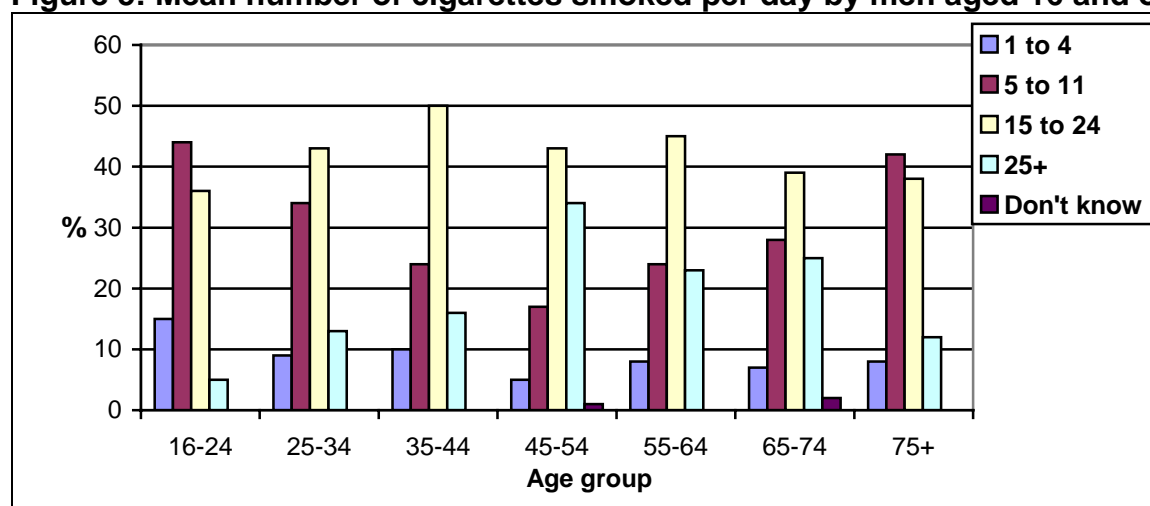
Source: Continuous Household Survey

Table 7: Prevalence of cigarette smoking by socio-economic group

	%						
	1983	1990-1	1994-5	1996-7	1998-9	2000-1	2002-3
Professional	17	21	18	13	15	9	17
Employer, manager	30	23	18	21	17	17	24
Intermediate non-manual	23	31	25	24	20	16	18
Junior non manual	40	36	30	27	25	20	27
Skilled manual	42	35	30	33	31	31	28
Semi-skilled manual	45	41	40	46	40	35	33
Unskilled manual	51	44	40	49	36	42	30
Other, eg refused, armed forces	24	24	23	24	23	20	28
All men aged 16 or over	39	33	29	31	28	26	27

Source: Continuous Household Survey

Figures from the 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey show that older men consume more cigarettes per day on average (see Figure 5). This would suggest that whilst young men are most likely to be smokers, on average they smoke the least number of cigarettes.

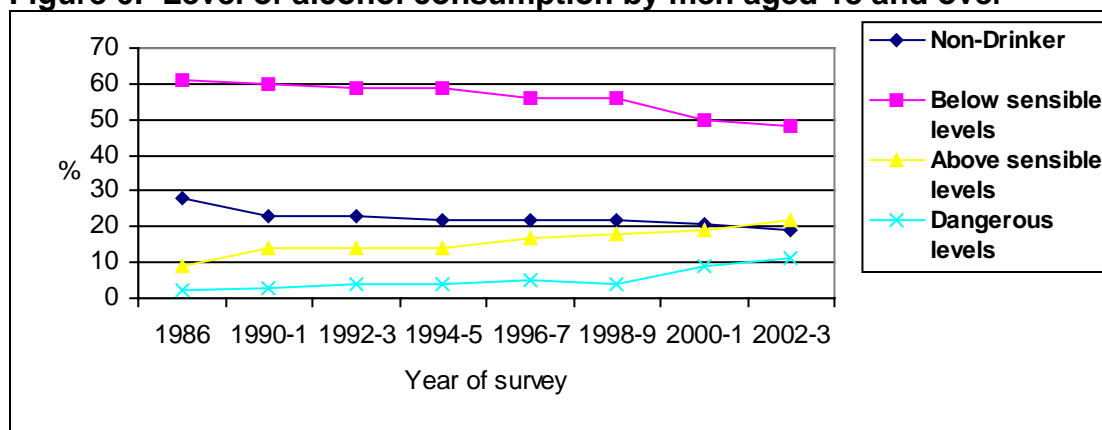
Figure 5: Mean number of cigarettes smoked per day by men aged 16 and over

Source: 2001 Health and Social Wellbeing Survey

Alcohol

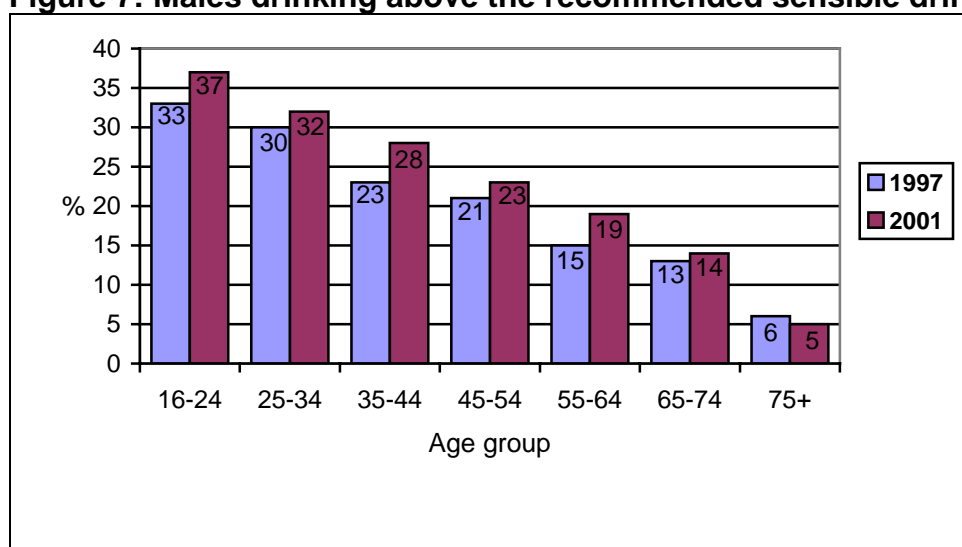
In contrast to the decrease in the proportion of men who smoke, the consumption of alcohol has increased among men during the last 15 years (see Figure 6). In particular, the levels of drinking above the recommended sensible level or at a dangerous level have increased since 1986, from 11% to 33% in 2002/3. Figure 7 shows that among respondents to the 2001 Health and Social Wellbeing Survey, over one third (37%) of men aged 16-24 years drank alcohol over the recommended sensible level of 21 units per week.

Figure 6: Level of alcohol consumption by men aged 18 and over



Source: Continuous Household Survey

Figure 7: Males drinking above the recommended sensible drinking level

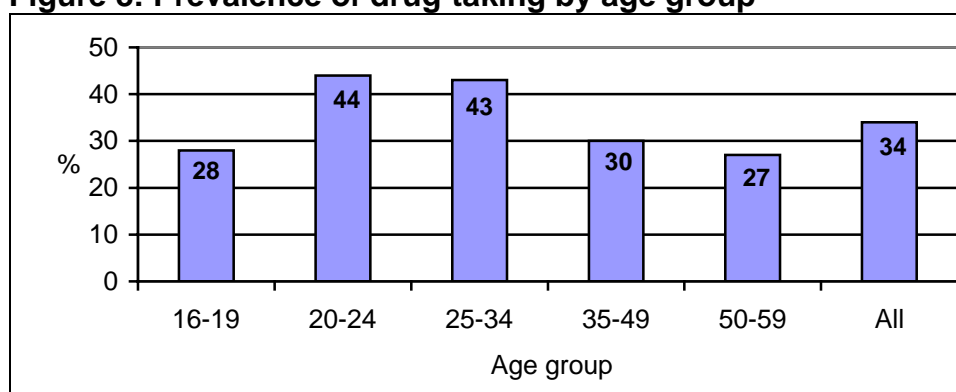


Source: Health and Social Wellbeing Survey 2001

Illegal drugs

According to the 2002-3 Continuous Household Survey, one third (34%) of male respondents aged 16-59 years had taken illegal drugs at some time in their lives. This figure was highest among 20-24 year olds (Figure 8). According to the Northern Ireland Drug Misuse Database (2002-3), by far the most commonly used drug among men presenting for treatment was cannabis (50%), followed by heroin (16%) and Ecstasy (9%).

Figure 8: Prevalence of drug-taking by age group



Source: 2002-3 Continuous Household Survey

Physical activity

The 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey included a section on physical activity. Table 8 shows responses to statements relating to the extent of physical activity undertaken in the previous six months. One third of men (33%) had been physically active regularly for longer than six months. Regular physical exercise was defined as taking part in exercise or sports 2-3 times per week for a minimum of 20 minutes at a time, or more general activities like walking, cycling or dancing 4-5 times a week adding up to at least 30 minutes per day.

Table 8: Physical activity in the past six months, by age group

	%							
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
I am not regularly physically active and do not intend to be	8	11	14	19	33	38	56	22
I am not regularly physically active but am thinking about starting	10	12	11	11	7	6	4	9
I do some physical activity but not enough to meet the description given	26	31	33	36	32	28	20	31
I am regularly physically active but only began in the last six months	8	7	4	3	3	2	1	4
I am regularly physically active and have been doing so for longer than 6 months	48	38	38	32	25	26	19	33

Source: 2001 Health and Social Wellbeing Survey

Stress

Stress and stressful life events can have a significant impact on people's overall health. Data from the 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey indicate that just over one half (52%) of all male respondents had experienced at least one of a list of stressful life events over the previous 12 months. Table 9 shows that 22% of all male respondents reported that a family member or friend had a serious health condition, 15% of men had experienced a bereavement, and for 14% of men, an existing health condition had become worse.

Table 9: Stress-related life events by age group

	%							
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
A member of your family or a friend had a serious health condition	15	19	24	26	26	23	14	22
A family member you were close to died	9	14	14	18	14	19	16	15
An existing health condition got worse	3	10	8	14	25	23	21	14
A close friend or someone who was important to you died	8	8	9	9	14	10	9	10
Had an operation or spent a period in hospital	5	9	5	7	7	11	6	7
Developed or found out that you had a serious illness or disability	1	2	4	8	8	7	6	5
Had a painful or upsetting treatment for a health condition	2	5	4	5	10	5	4	5
Had a serious accident or injury	4	6	5	2	4	2	1	4
None of these	64	51	51	47	39	38	48	48

Source: 2001 Health and Social Wellbeing Survey

Overall, one in ten men (10%) reported that they suffered a great deal of worry or stress. Men aged 45-54 years were the most likely to say that they had experienced a great deal of worry or stress (see Table 10).

Table 10: Men's self reported levels of stress over the last 12 months by age group

	%							
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
No worry or stress	22	15	11	10	14	30	29	17
Just a little	53	52	49	48	49	44	47	49
Quite a lot	19	22	31	29	26	18	16	24
A great deal of worry or stress	6	11	10	13	10	7	7	10

Source: 2001 Health and Social Wellbeing Survey

Attitudes

Respondents to the 2000 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey were asked if they thought that it was a good idea for doctors' surgeries and health centres to provide a special clinic for men to get check-ups, advice or health information: 84% of men and 90% of women agreed. Just over half of respondents (57% male, 50% female) thought that many men would attend such a clinic. Nearly two thirds of men (63%) said that they might use such a service themselves, with men aged 65 years or over being less supportive (54%).

Over one third of respondents (38% male and 36% female) thought that men's health wasn't taken seriously by the health services.

Useful sources of information

Miller, Robert, Devine, Paula, Schubotz, Dirk, 2004, 'Secondary Analysis of the 1997 and 2001 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Surveys', Belfast: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

McWhirter, Liz (ed.), 2004, 'Equality and Inequalities in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland', Belfast: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

www.ark.ac.uk/nilt The 2000 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey included questions on men's issues.

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety provides information and statistics on a large number of health-related issues.

www.mhfi.org The Men's Health Forum in Ireland provides online access to statistics, research and other resources, including the report 'Men's Health in Ireland'.

www.nisra.gov.uk The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is Northern Ireland's official statistics organisation. The NISRA website contains a comprehensive range of official Northern Ireland statistics and survey information.

www.equality.nisra.gov.uk The Equality Research and Information website produced by NISRA was designed with the aim of collating and disseminating statistics and research relevant to equality of opportunity and its promotion within the public sector. Data are disaggregated by all Section 75 equality groups, including gender.