

# Men in Northern Ireland: Report 3a December 2007

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The Men in Northern Ireland (MINI) series is produced by ARK, 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.

[www.ark.ac.uk](http://www.ark.ac.uk)

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](http://www.mensproject.org)

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## Men's health

### Key facts

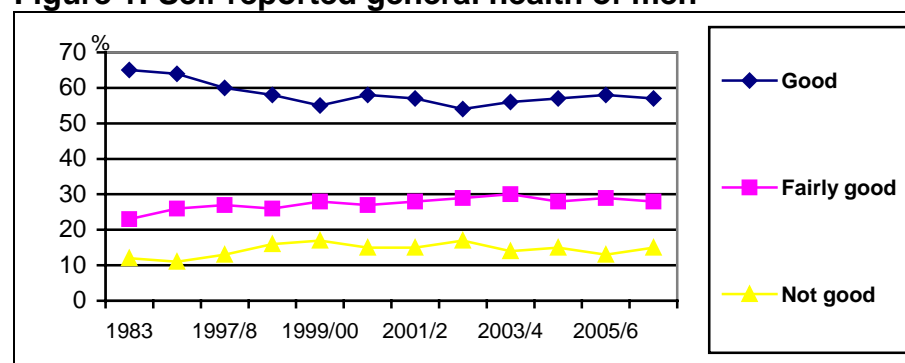
- Over half of men, 57%, report that their general health is good while 15% believe their health is not good.
- In 2006, 19% of men reported that they had some degree of disability.
- Men visit their GP and their dentist less than women do.
- In 2006/7, 25% of men were smokers.
- 24% of men have used illegal drugs at some stage.
- In 2006, 23% of men who drank regularly exceeded the recommended weekly alcohol limit of 21 units.
- In 2007, 64% of men were overweight or obese.

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 General Registrars Annual Report of 2006 stated that the life expectancy for men in Northern Ireland, at birth, was 76.2 years, while for women it was 81.1 years. Men's life expectancy and mortality 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 Continuous Household Survey of 2006/7 found that 57% of men aged 16 years or over assessed their general health as being 'good', 28% said it was 'fairly good' whilst 15% thought it was 'not good' (see Figure 1). The survey 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 of men



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'. Respondents who have not replied to any of the twelve questions with 'rather worse' or 'much worse' are often 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'. The 2006 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey shows that 16% of men can be described as 'depressed' but that women are more likely to be 'depressed' as 18% of female respondents were in this category. Men aged 35-44 years or 55-64 years are most likely to be 'depressed' than men in other age groups.

## GP visits

Statistics show that over the last few years men have been more reluctant to visit their GP than women. The results of the 2006/7 Continuous Household Survey shows that 12% of male respondents had visited a doctor in the last 14 days while 18% of women had. Figures from the 2006 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey show that the proportion of men and women suffering from common conditions are very similar, for example, angina (females 6%, males 7%), diabetes not related to pregnancy (females 4%, males 4%) and heart attack (females 2%, males 4%). However, the proportion of men having high blood pressure diagnosed by a health professional is much lower than for women (19% and 27% respectively), regardless of age.

Data from the 2006 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey show that 17% of men were quite or very dissatisfied with their local doctors/GP, while only 12% of female respondents were.

## Disability

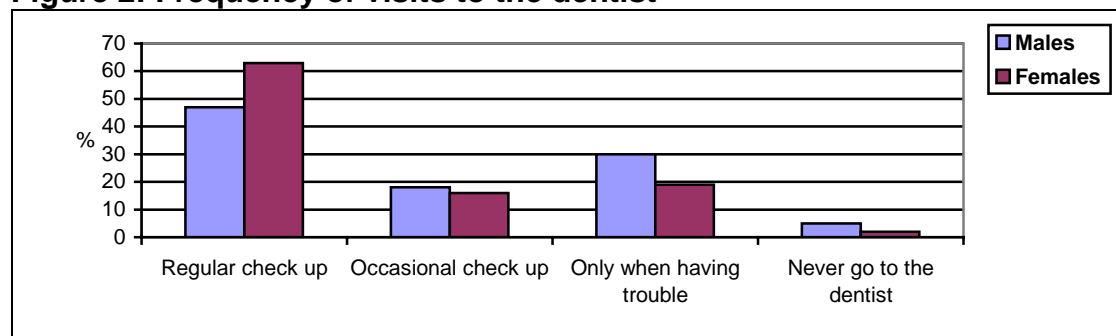
Results from the Northern Ireland Survey of Activity Limitation and Disabilities indicate that 19% of adult males aged 16 years or over living in a private household had some degree of disability. The level of prevalence increases with age, with a peak of 56% for men aged 75 years or over. Among younger people aged 15 years or younger, twice as many boys (8%) than girls (4%) had a disability. In particular, intellectual and social behavioural difficulties are more prevalent amongst boys than girls.

The 2003 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey indicates that most people believe that disabled people can still perform well, at work, despite their problems. 71% of male respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the main problem faced by disabled people at work is other people's prejudice, not their own lack of ability.

## Dental health

Figure 2 reflects the results of the 2004/5 Continuous Household Survey which showed that men were significantly less likely than women, to visit a dentist. Less than half the male respondents (47%) reported that they go for regular dental check-ups, while 63% of female respondents said that they do (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Frequency of visits to the dentist**



Source: 2004/5 Continuous Household Survey

Despite their lower attendance rates, men were still shown to be more likely than women to have some natural teeth left in their old age. 52% of male respondents over 80 years of age had some natural teeth left, while the figure for women in the same category was only 36%.

There are significant differences among men from different socio-economic groups. For example, 83% of professional males are registered with a dentist while only 74% of unskilled manual workers are. In addition 96% of male professional respondents reported having some natural teeth, while only 79% of unskilled manual workers had.

## Smoking

Data from the Continuous Household Survey shows that the proportion of men smoking in Northern Ireland has decreased from 39% in 1983 to 25% in 2006/7. The 2006/07 survey also indicated a connection between marital status and the likelihood of males smoking, showing that 36% of single men were smokers whereas only 19% of married/cohabiting men were. There were also differences in the level of smoking according to socio-economic group: 8% of professional males were smokers, whilst among unskilled manual workers the figure was much higher at 38%. This survey also showed that 23% of men, mostly in the older age categories, were ex-smokers, while only 14% of women were. Three quarters of male smokers (77%) said that they would like to give up smoking.

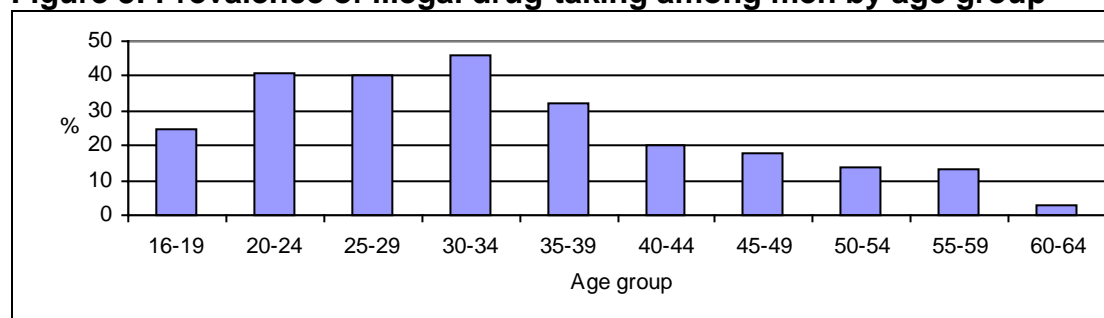
## Alcohol

In contrast to the decrease in the proportion of men who smoke, the consumption of alcohol has increased among men during the last two decades. The 2005/6 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey indicated that 83% of men and 74% of women aged 16 years or over drank alcohol. For men, the recommended sensible alcohol limit is 21 units per week and 23% of men who had drunk in the previous year reported that they regularly exceed this amount. The sensible limit for women is lower, at 14 units, but only 15% of female drinkers admitted to exceeding this limit. There is a clear connection between excessive alcohol consumption and age: almost one third of men, 31%, who were aged between 16-24 years, drank over their recommended sensible level of alcohol per week, compared with 8% of those aged 75 years and over.

## Illegal drugs

The 2006/7 Continuous Household Survey suggests that illegal drug use is more common among men than among women. One quarter of male respondents aged 16-64 years had taken illegal drugs at some time in their lives, compared with 14% of female respondents. The prevalence of reported illegal drug taking was highest among 30-34 year olds, at 46% (see Figure 3). However, only 7% of male respondents aged 16-64 years had used illegal drugs in the past 12 months, while only 3% of females had. Cannabis was more frequently used by these respondents than any other drug. The survey results suggest that obtaining illegal drugs was not thought to be very difficult by many men in Northern Ireland: 48% of male respondents aged 16-39 years believed that it would be fairly, or very, easy to obtain illegal drugs if they wished to do so.

**Figure 3: Prevalence of illegal drug-taking among men by age group**



Source: 2006/7 Continuous Household Survey

## Physical activity

The 2005/6 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey included some questions on physical activity, the results of which indicate that 33% of men and 28% of women take the recommended weekly level of physical activity. 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.

The results of this survey suggest that men are generally more physically active than women. 40% of male respondents had been involved in sporting activities in the previous 4 weeks while only 33% of women had. Males, in the age group of 16–24 years, were clearly the most physically active and levels of physical activity noticeably declined in the older age groups.

## Obesity

The 2005/6 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey showed that slightly more male respondents were obese, 25%, than female respondents, 23%. Overall 64% of male respondents were either overweight or obese. There were clear differences according to age, as 28% of men in the youngest age category, 16-24 years, were either overweight or obese, compared with 81% aged 55-64 years. However, 15% of men in the youngest age category were underweight.

Diet and nutrition are important factors in the fight against obesity but when asked about the consumption of fruit and vegetables, only 22% of male respondents, to the 2006/7 Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey, said they eat the recommended five portions per day. The figure for women however was also quite low, at 31%.

## Attitudes

Respondents were asked in the 2004 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, whether they believed men feel embarrassed about visiting doctors and other health services. 86% of men and 91% of women said 'yes, definitely' or 'yes, probably' which helps to explain why so many men are reluctant to visit their local G.P. In addition, almost a quarter (24%) of male respondents agreed with the statement that men's health was not taken seriously by the health services. 17% of female respondents also agreed. There was general agreement by 93% of men and 95% of women that men ignore minor health problems until they become more serious.

### Useful sources of information

**[www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)** The 2000 and 2004 Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys included questions on men's issues, while the 2006 survey included questions on health.

**[www.dhsspsni.gov.uk](http://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](http://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](http://www.nisra.gov.uk)** The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). This website contains a range of official Northern Ireland statistics and survey information, including the Continuous Household Survey and Health and Social Wellbeing Survey results.