

Doctors (overall number)

The number of doctors in OECD countries increased from about 2.9 million in 2001 to 3.5 million in 2011 and 4.3 million in 2021. In all OECD countries, the number of doctors increased more rapidly than population size over the past decade, so that, on average, the number of doctors per 1 000 population rose from 3.2 in 2011 to 3.7 in 2021 (Figure 8.4).

In 2021, the number of doctors in OECD member countries ranged from 2.5 or fewer per 1 000 population in Türkiye, Colombia and Mexico to over 5 per 1 000 in Norway, Austria, Portugal and Greece. However, the numbers in Portugal and Greece are overestimated as they include all doctors licensed to practise, not just those actively practising.

Among accession and partner countries, Indonesia, South Africa and India had less than 1 doctor per 1 000 population in 2021. In China, the density of doctors increased rapidly from 1.5 per 1 000 population in 2011 to 2.5 per 1 000 in 2021. In Brazil and Peru, the number of doctors per 1 000 population also grew considerably over the past decade but remained low compared to most OECD countries.

The growing number of doctors in OECD countries has been driven by a number of factors. The main reason is an increase in the number of students admitted to and graduating from domestic medical education and training programmes (see section on “Medical graduates”). Long-held concerns about doctor shortages and the ageing of the medical workforce prompted a large number of OECD countries to increase the number of students in medical education programmes many years ago; as a result, the number of medical students continues to rise in most countries (OECD, 2023^[1]). In some countries, immigration of foreign-trained doctors also contributed to the growth of available doctors (see section on “International migration of doctors and nurses”). A third factor that has contributed to this rise is the fact that in several countries a growing number of doctors are extending their careers beyond the previous standard retirement age. In countries like Italy and Israel, about one in four doctors in 2021 were aged over 65 (see section on “Doctors (by age, sex and category)”). While the number of doctors per population has increased in all countries as a total headcount, this may not be the case when measured in full-time equivalents, if reductions in working hours exceed the growth in numbers.

When analysing the increase in the number of doctors, the base level must be considered. Countries such as Korea and the United Kingdom recorded substantial increases over the last decade but had comparably low numbers in 2011. Norway, Germany and Switzerland, on the other hand, also saw strong growth in the number of doctors but already recorded above-average rates in 2011 (Figure 8.5).

Growth has been more modest in Greece. France and Japan also recorded a more limited increase in the number of doctors between 2011 and 2021. In France, the number of doctors was similar to the increase in population growth, and it is projected to fall until 2030 – both in absolute levels and per capita – as

more doctors are expected to retire than enter the profession. This prompted the French government to increase the number of students admitted to medical schools by an additional 20% during 2021-25 compared to the previous five-year period (Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé, 2021^[2]). In Japan, the number of medical students also increased in recent years, resulting in a growing number of graduates (see section on “Medical graduates”). In June 2023, the UK Government announced its plans to increase further the number of medical students to address current and future shortages (NHS England, 2023^[3]). However, it takes several years before any decision to increase student intake translates into a higher supply of fully trained doctors.

In many OECD countries, concerns about doctor shortages relate more specifically to shortages of general practitioners (GPs) (see section on “Doctors (by age, sex and category)”) and shortages of doctors in rural and remote regions (see section on “Geographic distribution of doctors”).

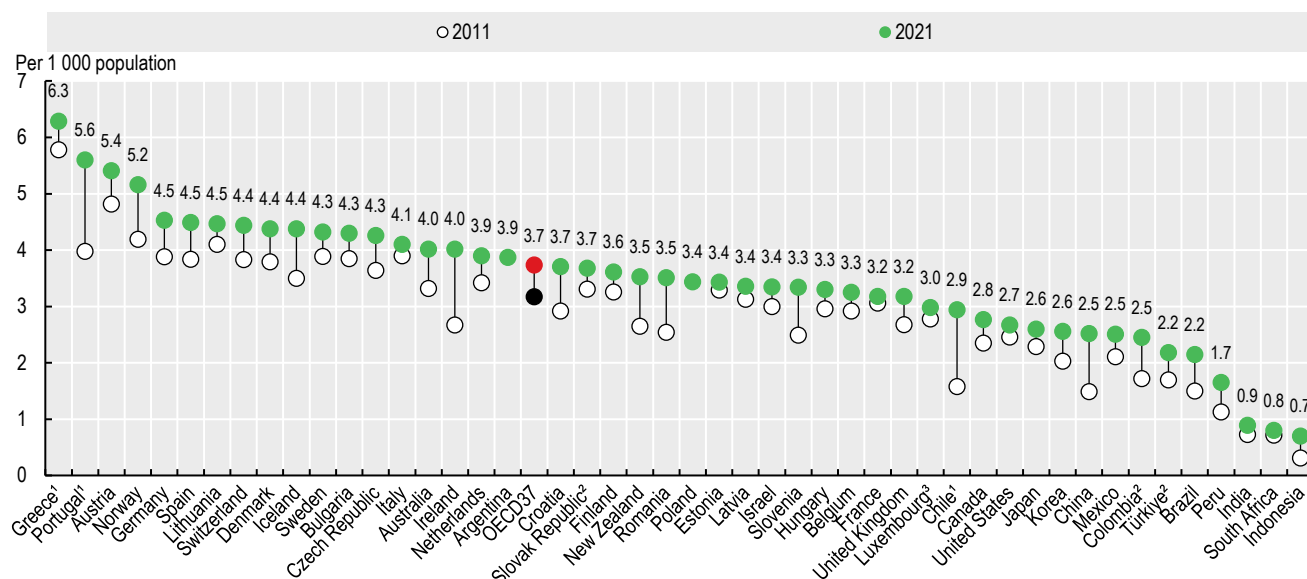
Definition and comparability

The data for most countries refer to practising doctors, defined as the number of doctors providing care directly to patients. In many countries (but not in Belgium and France), the numbers include interns and residents (doctors in training). Colombia, the Slovak Republic and Türkiye also include doctors who are active in the health sector even though they may not provide direct care to patients, adding another 5-10% of doctors. Chile, Greece and Portugal report the number of physicians entitled to practise, not only those currently practising, resulting in an even larger overestimation of the number of practising doctors.

References

- Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021), *Arrêté du 13 septembre 2021 définissant les objectifs nationaux pluriannuels de professionnels de santé à former pour la période 2021-2025 - Légifrance*, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000044053576>. [2]
- NHS England (2023), *NHS Long Term Workforce Plan*, <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/nhs-long-term-workforce-plan-v1.1.pdf>. [3]
- OECD (2023), *Ready for the Next Crisis? Investing in Health System Resilience*, OECD Health Policy Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1e53cf80-en>. [1]

Figure 8.4. Practising doctors per 1 000 population, 2011 and 2021 (or nearest year)

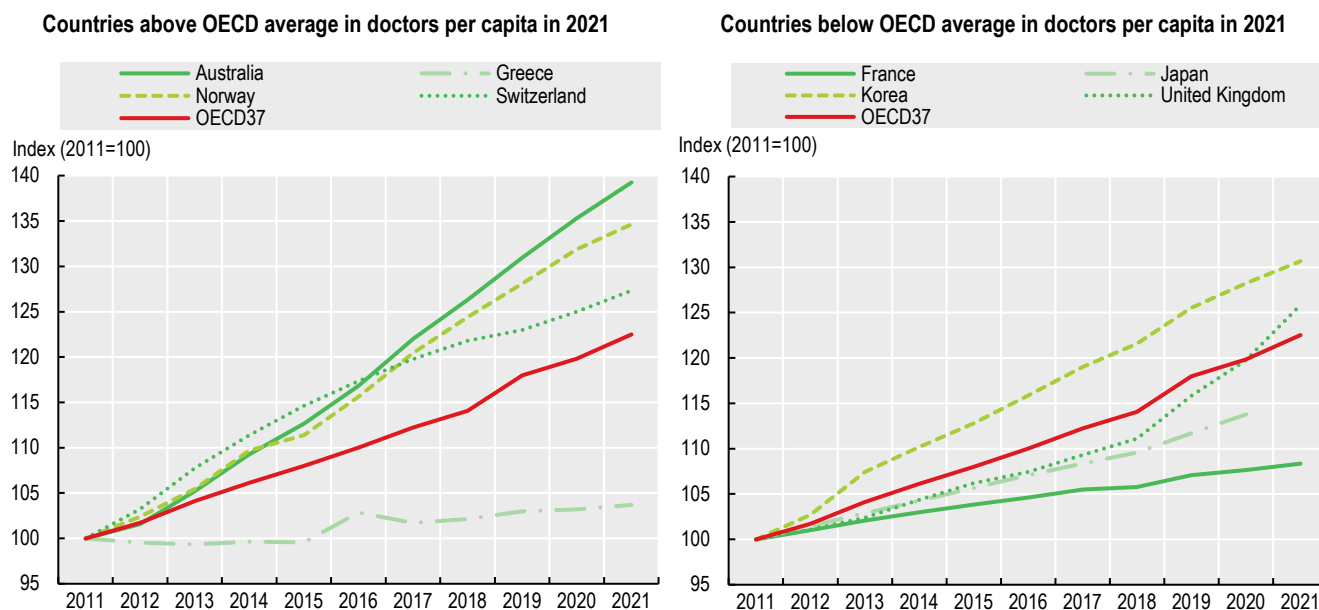


1. Refer to all doctors licensed to practise, resulting in a large overestimation of the number of practising doctors (e.g. around 30% in Portugal). 2. Includes not only doctors providing direct care to patients but also those working in the health sector as managers, educators, researchers, etc. (adding another 5-10% of doctors). 3. Latest available data 2017.


Source: OECD Health Statistics 2023.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/k4uhx3>

Figure 8.5. Evolution in the number of doctors, selected countries, 2011-21



Source: OECD Health Statistics 2023.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/sr9yp8>



From:
Health at a Glance 2023
OECD Indicators

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/7a7afb35-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2023), "Doctors (overall number)", in *Health at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9f24c36f-en>

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