

Healthy life expectancy at birth and at age 65

Healthy life expectancy is an important indicator of population health, as it signals whether years of life are lived in good health or with some health issues and disabilities (activity limitations). A greater number of healthy life years generally means a healthier workforce, fewer early retirements due to health problems, and reduced or postponed health and long-term care needs.

In 2020, the number of healthy life years was 64.5 years for women and 63.5 years for men in the EU (Figure 3.3). The gender gap in healthy life years (one year) was much smaller than in life expectancy (5.7 years in 2020) as women tend to spend a greater proportion of their lives with some activity limitations: 22% of the life expectancy of women was spent with some activity limitations in 2020 compared with 18% for men on average in the EU.

Among EU countries, Sweden recorded the highest number of healthy life years at birth for both women and men, followed by Malta and Italy. Latvia had the lowest number of healthy life years for both women and men. Variations across countries can be partly explained by the way disability (activity limitation) is measured in each country, impacting the comparability of the results to some extent (Eurostat, 2022^[1]).

The gender gap in healthy life years was particularly large in Bulgaria and Poland, driven mainly by much shorter life expectancy among men. In contrast, in the Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Luxembourg and Denmark, the number of healthy life years is lower for women than men as women live a much greater share of their lives with some disabilities.

As people get older, the proportion of remaining years of life that they can expect to live free of disability falls. This is particularly the case among women. While women across EU countries could expect to live another 21 years when they reach the age of 65 in 2020, less than half of these years was free of activity limitations. For men, the remaining life expectancy at age 65 was almost four years shorter across EU countries (17.4 years), but they could also expect to live almost ten years free of disability, so the gender gap in healthy life years was very small (Figure 3.4).

A range of policies can contribute to increasing healthy life expectancy, including greater efforts to prevent health problems, promoting equal access to care, and better management of chronic health problems when they occur to reduce their disabling effects (OECD, 2017^[2]).

Definition and comparability

Healthy life years are defined as the number of years spent free of long-term activity limitation (i.e. disability-free life expectancy). Healthy life years are calculated by Eurostat based on life table data and age-specific prevalence data on long-term activity limitations. The disability measure is the Global Activity Limitation Indicator, which measures limitation in usual activities based on the EU-SILC survey.

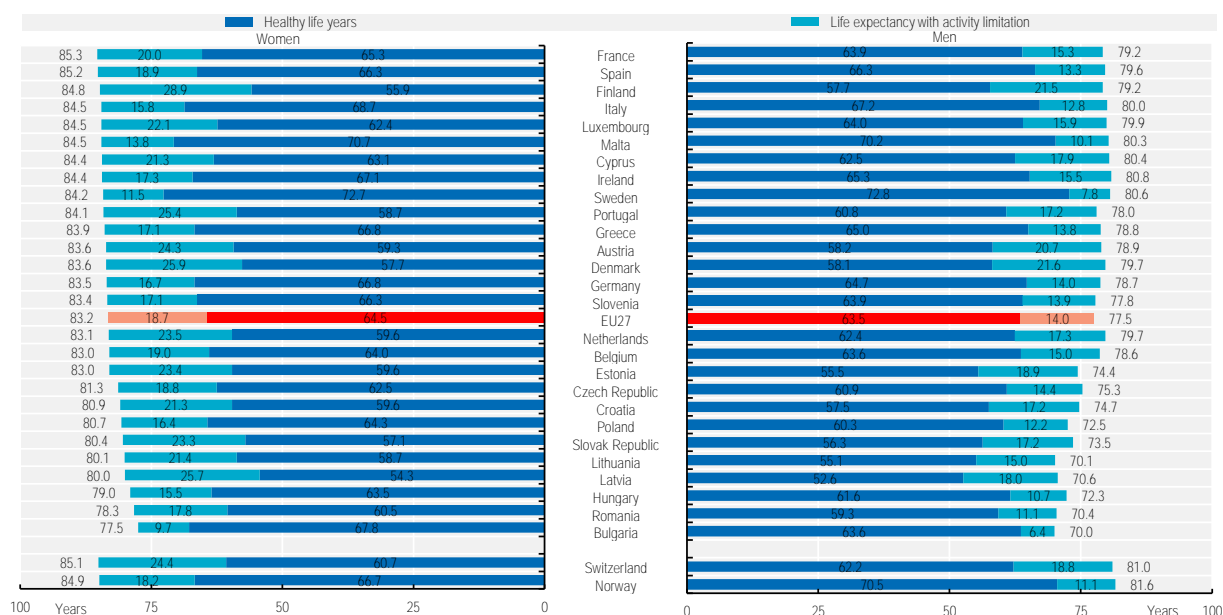
The comparability of data on healthy life years is limited by the fact that the indicator is derived from self-reported data which can be affected by people's subjective assessment of their activity limitation (disability) and by social and cultural factors. There are also differences across countries in the formulation of the survey question on disability in EU-SILC.

References

Eurostat (2022), "How many healthy life years for EU men and women?", *News release*, 13 June 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220613-1>. [1]

OECD (2017), *Preventing Ageing Unequally*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264279087-en>. [2]

Figure 3.3. Life expectancy and healthy life years at birth, by gender, 2020 (or nearest year)

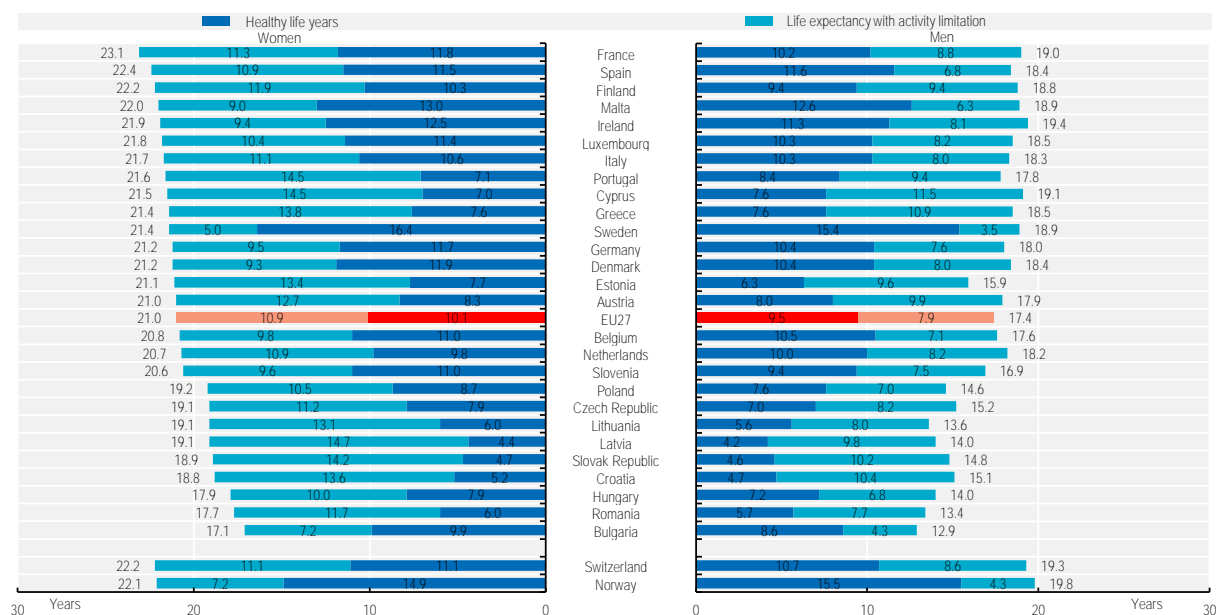


Note: The EU average is weighted. Data comparability is limited because of different formulations of the survey question in EU-SILC.

Source: Eurostat Database.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/1kcodu>

Figure 3.4. Life expectancy and healthy life years at 65, by gender, 2020 (or nearest year)



Note: The EU average is weighted. Data comparability is limited because of different formulations of the survey question in EU-SILC.

Source: Eurostat Database.

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



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