

# Part II Health status

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## 3 Health and wellbeing

This chapter provides an overview of the health and wellbeing of young people, using data collected as part of the ABS National Health Survey. Unlike the other chapters in this part of the report which measure departures from health (such as mortality and morbidity), information in this chapter covers both positive and negative aspects of health, based on an individual's own assessment of their health. Data are available only for people aged 15 years and over, but data for those aged 15–17 years are limited.

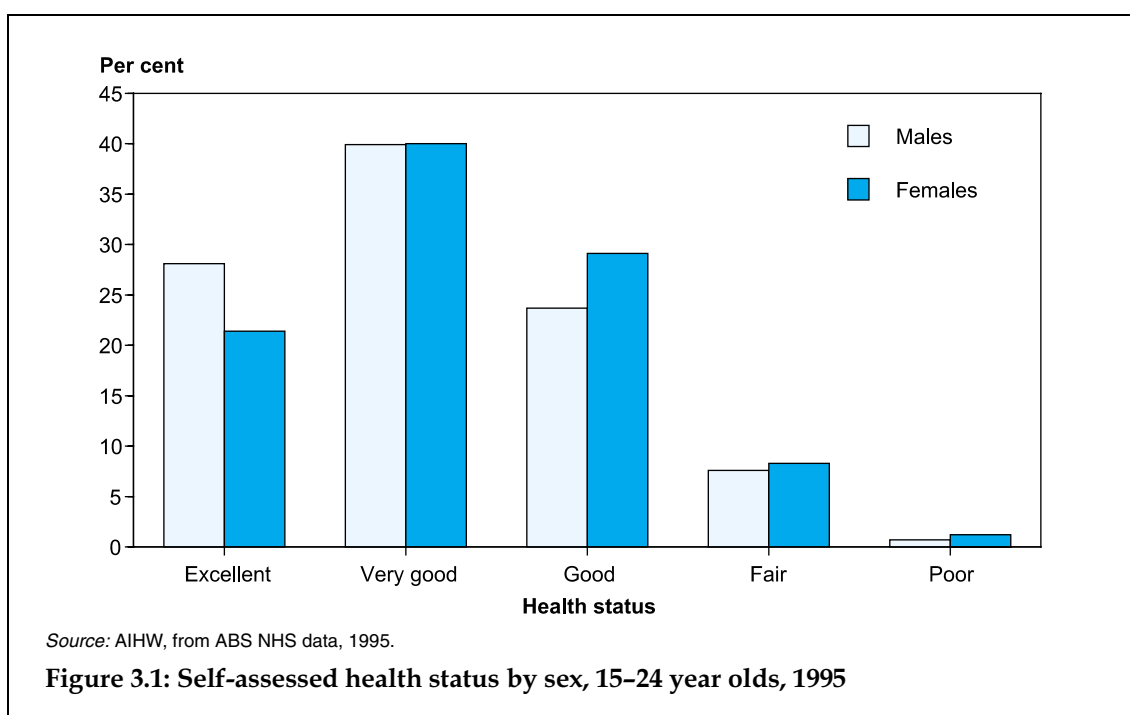
Two measures of health status are included in this chapter: general health status (for 15–24 year olds), and measures based on the Medical Outcomes Study 36-item Short-Form Health Survey (SF-36) questionnaire (for 18–24 year olds). More information on each of these measures is included in the relevant sections below. As well as analysis of these measures for young people, comparisons are also made with other age groups. Comparisons with data collected in earlier National Health Surveys are not possible due to changes in the questions included in the surveys (ABS 1996:33).

## General health

Information for this section comes from the data collected in the National Health Survey on 'self-assessed health status' (ABS 1996:33), which is defined as the 'respondent's perception of their general health status'. The scale used in the 1995 survey has five levels: excellent, very good, good, fair and poor. The question is also one of the 36 questions included in the SF-36 survey (further details on the survey included are in the next section of this chapter). This item is used in many studies, and has been validated elsewhere (Ware et al. 1993:9.1–9.32).

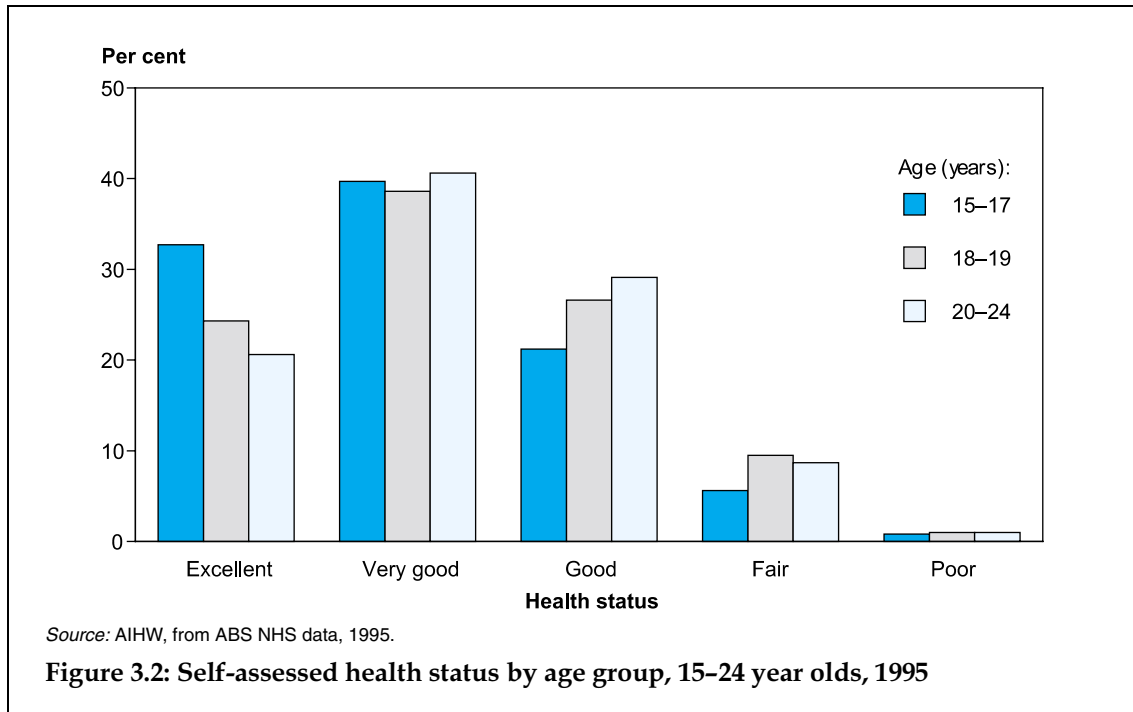
Another measure of health status available from the National Health Survey is reported recent and/or long-term illnesses. Results based on this data item are included along with other measures of ill-health in Chapter 6: Morbidity overview.

Figure 3.1 shows the percentage of young people aged 15–24 years reporting different levels of self-assessed health status, by sex.



- Around two-thirds of young people reported their health as 'excellent' or 'very good' – 68% of males and 61.4% of females.
- Approximately one-quarter of people in this age group reported their health to be 'good' in 1995 – 23% of males and 29% of females.
- For this age group, more males (28%) reported their health as 'excellent' than females (21%). This difference was largely offset in the proportions reporting their health as 'good' (24% of males and 29% of females).
- However, more females than males reported their health as 'fair' or 'poor' (males 8%; females 10%).
- A higher proportion of young people aged 15–17 years (33%) reported their health as 'excellent' compared with those aged 20–24 years (21%).
- This difference was reflected in the proportion of these two age groups reporting their health as 'good' (21% of 15–17 year olds compared with 29% of 20–24 year olds) and in the proportion reporting their health as 'fair' (6% compared with 9%)

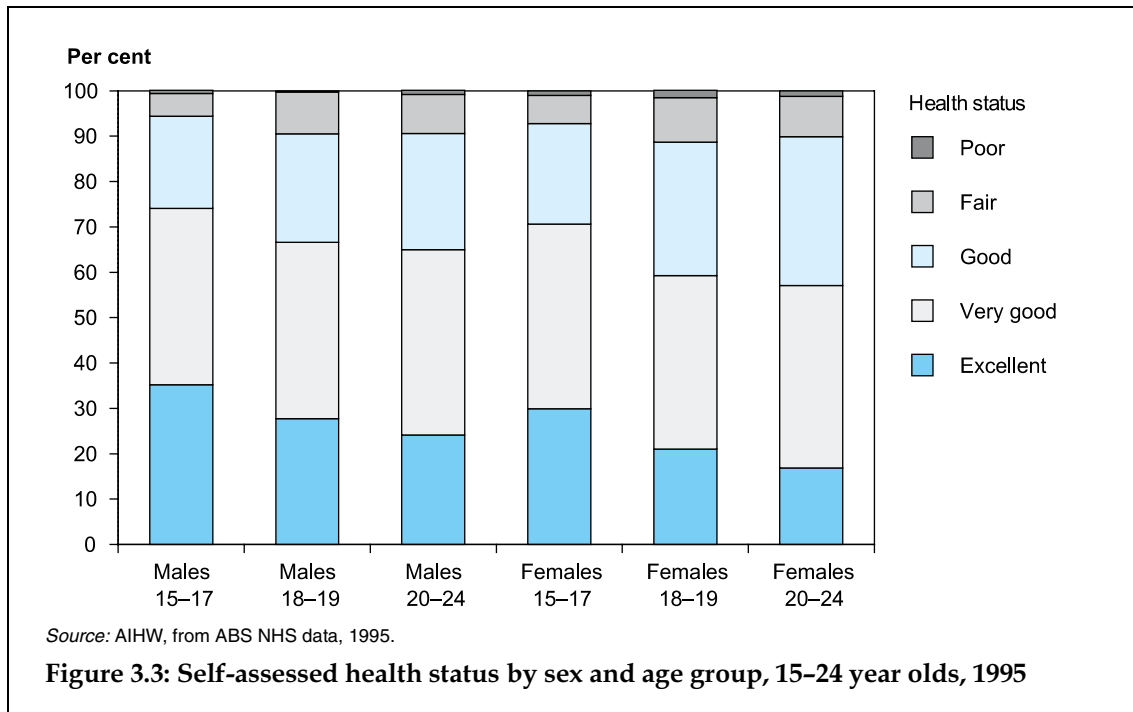
Figure 3.2 shows patterns in self-assessed health status for three age groups of young people.



- A higher proportion of young people aged 15-17 years (33%) reported their health as 'excellent' compared with those aged 20-24 years (21%).
- This difference was reflected in the proportion of these two age groups reporting their health as 'good' (21% of 15-17 year olds compared to 29% of 20-24 year olds) and in the proportion reporting their health as 'fair' (6% compared to 9%).

## Health and wellbeing

Figure 3.3 shows further details of self-assessed health status by sex and age group, and thus widens the results shown in Figures 3.1 and 3.2.



- The difference in the proportions of young people reporting their health as 'excellent' between the youngest and oldest age groups occur in both males and females (males 35% to 24%; females 30% to 17%).
- Similarly, both males and females had higher proportions of 20-24 year olds reporting their health as 'good' or 'fair' compared with 15-17 year olds.

## SF-36 Health Survey

In 1995, a subset of the National Health Survey sample were asked to complete the SF-36 Health Survey, a well-established questionnaire used to measure health and wellbeing. Data were collected only from people aged 18 years or over. These data provide indicators of eight dimensions of health and wellbeing: physical functioning; role – physical; bodily pain; general health; vitality; social functioning; role – emotional; and mental health. These all relate to current health status, and are outlined in Table 3.1. An indication of changes in health status (‘reported health transition’) is also included in the survey (ABS 1996:33–35).

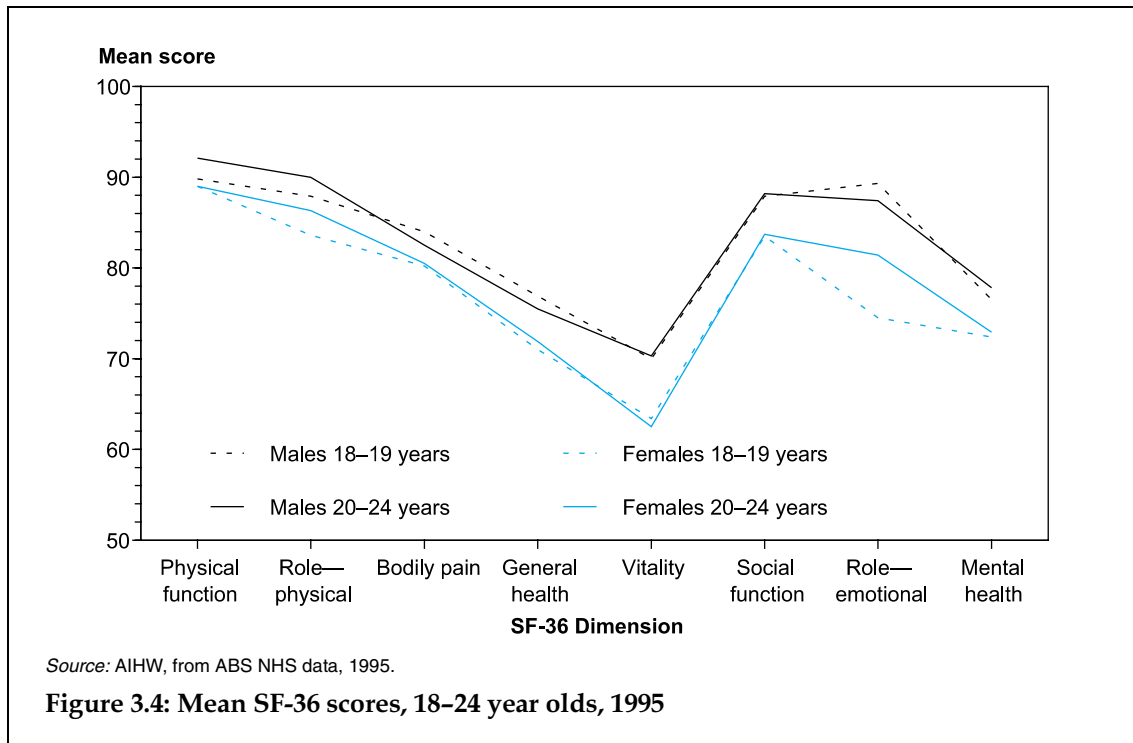
**Table 3.1: Summary of information about SF-36 scores**

Scale	Items	Validity <sup>(a)</sup>		Definitions of lowest and highest scores	
		P	M	Lowest possible (floor)	Highest possible (ceiling)
Physical functioning	10	●	○	Limited a lot in performing all physical activities including bathing or dressing due to health	Performs all types of physical activities including the most vigorous without limitations due to health
Role—physical	4	●	○	Problems with work or other daily activities as a result of physical health	No problems with work or other daily activities as a result of physical health
Bodily pain	2	●	○	Very severe and extremely limiting pain	No pain or limitations due to pain
General health	5	●	●	Evaluates personal health as poor and believes it is likely to get worse	Evaluates personal health as excellent
Vitality	4	●	●	Feels tired and worn out all of the time	Feels full of pep and energy all of the time
Social functioning	2	●	●	Extreme and frequent interference with normal social activities due to physical or emotional problems	Performs normal social activities without interference due to physical or emotional problems
Role—emotional	3	○	●	Problems with work or other daily activities as a result of emotional problems	No problems with work or other daily activities as a result of emotional problems
Mental health	5	○	●	Feelings of nervousness and depression all of the time	Feels peaceful, happy, and calm all of the time

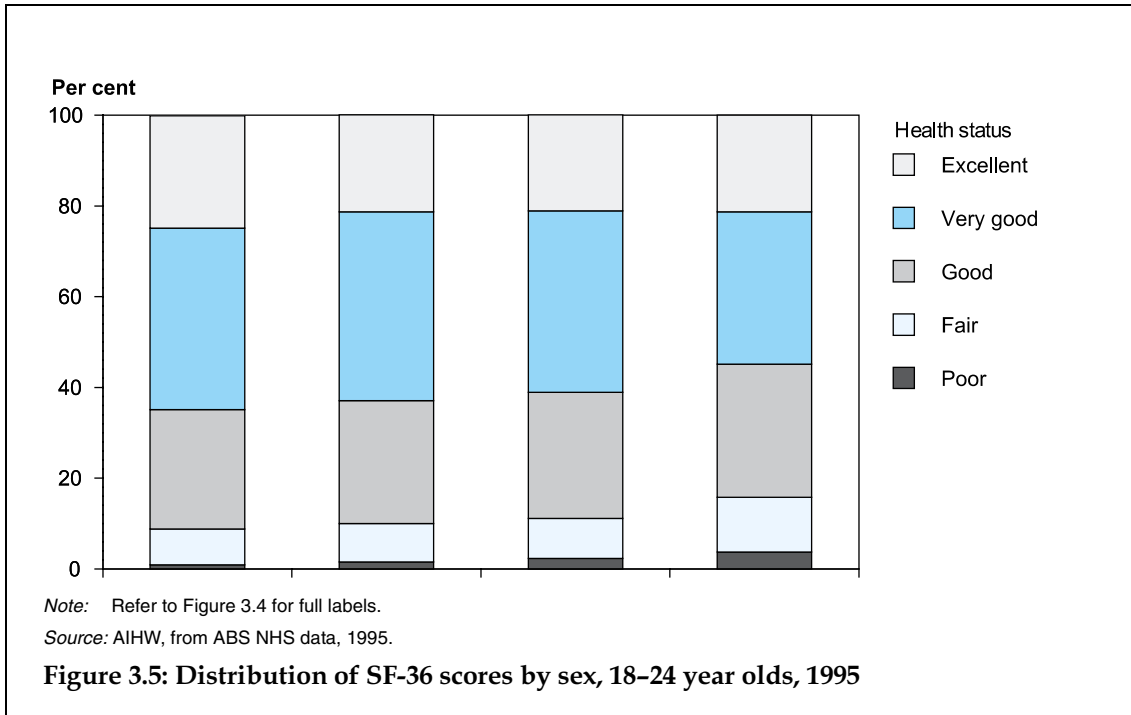
(a) P = physical health, M = mental health, ● = substantial, ● = moderate, and ○ = weak validity

Source: Ware et al. 1993:8.6.

## Health and wellbeing



- The pattern of the mean scores for the eight dimensions of the SF-36 survey follows that of the Australian population (ABS 1997: 13), that is, with higher mean scores for the physical dimensions (the left of the graph), a dip in the middle for the general health and vitality scores, and then a rise and fall again for the mental health scores. This pattern is also similar to the general pattern seen in other countries' population scores, and reflects the measurement used in each scale (Ware et al. 1993:11.2). For example, to record a high vitality score, a respondent would have to report feeling full of pep and energy all of the time.
- Figure 3.4 shows that females in this age group have lower mean scores than their male counterparts in all eight dimensions. This generally follows the pattern for the overall population, for which the age-standardised mean rates for females are lower than for males in all dimensions except 'general health' (ABS 1997:12).
- There is not a great deal of variability in the mean scores between the two age groups included in Figure 3.4. The exception is for the 'role – emotional' dimension, where females aged 18–19 years have a mean score substantially lower than for females aged 20–24 years.
- The above data can be used as 'normative data' – the average score for a population can be used to compare the scores of individuals (or sub-population groups) against those of the corresponding population (Ware et al. 1993:10.1). Population 'norms' are often calculated by age and sex, as in the above figure.



- Whereas Figure 3.4 shows the mean scores for each dimension of the SF-36 survey, Figure 3.5 shows the distribution of the scores using boxplots, for males and females separately. The square dots in each boxplot indicate the mean score, while the horizontal line within each box indicates the median (or 50th percentile) score. The top and bottom of the boxes indicate the 75th and 25th percentile scores respectively. The ends of the tails indicate the 10th and 90th percentile scores.
- In nearly all of the eight dimensions, there are substantially more females in the lower ends of the distribution of scores, compared with males. This is also reflected in the lower mean scores, as shown in Figure 3.4.
- Note that some of the boxes in Figure 3.5 have appear to have no median (50th) or upper (90th) percentiles, or boxes indicating 75th and 25th percentiles. In these cases, the corresponding percentiles are equal to a score of 100.

## Health and wellbeing

As mentioned above, as well as measures on the eight dimensions of current health status, information is also collected on 'reported health transition' (rating of health compared with one year earlier) as part of the SF-36. Summary results are shown in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2: Reported health transitions by self-assessed health status, 18–24 year olds, 1995**

Self-assessed health status	Reported health transition				
	Much better now	Somewhat better now	About the same	Somewhat worse now	Much worse now
Excellent	2	3	13	0	0
Very good	6	8	26	2	0
Good	3	5	17	4	0
Fair	1	2	5	3	0
Poor	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>

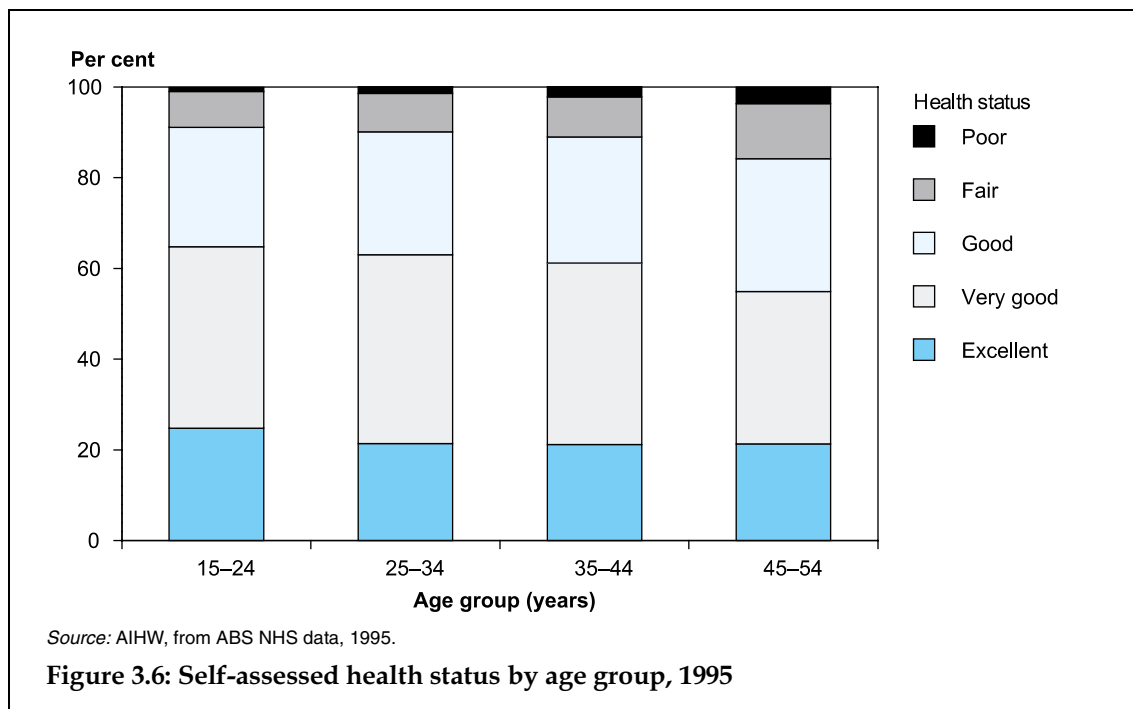
Source: AIHW, from ABS NHS data, 1995.

- The majority (over 60%) of young people aged 18–24 years reported that their health was 'about the same' as 1 year ago. Only 10% reported that their health was worse than 1 year ago.
- The vast majority of young people reporting their health as better than 1 year ago assessed their current health status in the range 'good' to 'excellent'.

## Comparisons with other ages

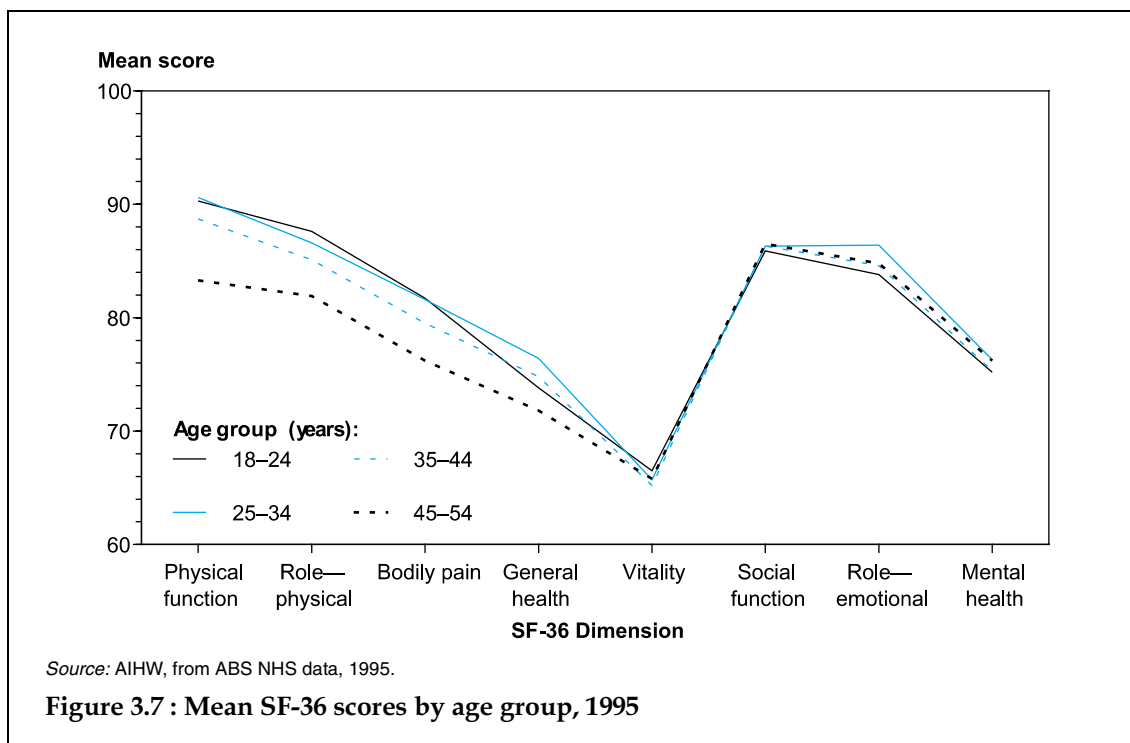
This section presents some comparisons between the health and wellbeing of young people compared with older age groups.

### General health



- Figure 3.6 shows some relationship between age and self-assessed health status. Higher proportions of young people aged 15-24 years reported their health as 'excellent' (25%) compared with the next three older age groups (all 21%).
- The proportion in each age group reporting their health as 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent' varies by age – 91% of 15-24 year olds, 90% of people aged 25-34 years, 89% in the 35-44 year age group, and then a fall to 84% of 45-54 year olds.

### SF-36



- While Figure 3.6 shows only the mean scores in the eight dimensions of the SF-36, but some relationship can still be seen when comparing across age groups.
- Young people aged 18-24 years generally had better mean scores for the physical health dimensions of the SF-36 Health Survey (on the left of the graph), particularly compared with the two older age groups included on the graph.
- However, the younger peoples' mean scores for the mental health related dimensions (on the right of the graph) were lower than for the other age groups included in the comparison.
- The combination of these factors is reflected in the mean score for 'general health',<sup>1</sup> where the mean score for young people ranks third out of the four age groups included. Only the 45-54 year age group had a lower mean score for 'general health'.

### Reported health transition

Compared to some other age groups, relatively high proportions of young people report their health as getting worse (the lower two categories in Figure 3.6). For young males, 10% reported their health as getting worse, compared with 7% of 25-34 year olds and 9% of 35-44 year olds. For young females, 10% reported their health as worsening, compared with 9% of 25-34 year olds, 8% of 35-44 year olds and 10% of 45-54 year olds (ABS 1997:24).

1. 'General health' includes questions on self-assessed health status, as well as questions relating to health compared with others, and whether health is expected to get worse.

## References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1996. 1995 National Health Survey users' guide. ABS Cat. No. 4363.0. Canberra: ABS.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1997. 1995 National Health Survey SF-36 population norms, Australia. ABS Cat. No. 4399.0. Canberra: ABS.

Ware JE, Snow KK, Kosinski M and Gandek B 1993. SF-36 Health Survey: manual and interpretation guide. Boston, Massachusetts: The Health Institute, New England Medical Center.