

# **Indicators of health risk factors**

**The AIHW view**

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is Australia's national health and welfare statistics and information agency. The Institute's mission is 'Better health and wellbeing for Australians through better health and welfare statistics and information'.

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**Australian Institute of Health and Welfare**

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# Preface

Risk factor information plays an important part in the measurement of the health of Australians. The collection of this information contributes to policy formulation for health interventions, programs and services.

A vast amount of work has been undertaken into the formulation of indicators for risk factor information by a number of organisations. These provide a valuable mechanism for the comparison of data overtime and across collections, and are often used to measure performance in the health sector.

A number of organisations now collect risk factor information and at times release findings which may differ from each other. This sometimes results in confusion for policy makers, analysts, the community and other data users as to which measure to use in which circumstance.

This report by the AIHW examines data in relation to four health related risk factors – physical inactivity, overweight and obesity, tobacco smoking and alcohol consumption. Particular attention is given to the ability of current data, and the instruments used to collect these data, to provide measures of established population risk factors. The Institute strongly supports the ongoing work on indicators and encourages a unified approach in the collection and interpretation of health risk data between data collection agencies. The Institute acknowledges the current work on data harmonisation being undertaken by the National Public Health Information Working Group's CATI Technical Reference Group and would recommend that this Group and other similar groups recognise the recommendations set out in this report.

One aim of this report is to facilitate discussion on this topic with those who use health risk data for analysis and for policy making, and those who develop collection instruments and collect data. I therefore invite readers of this report to provide comments about these issues and encourage organisations interested in risk factor data and other stakeholders to work together towards a unified approach in the collection of this information. Comments may be sent to [riskfactors@aihw.gov.au](mailto:riskfactors@aihw.gov.au).

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# Abbreviations

AAS	Active Australia Survey
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AusDiab	Australian Diabetes, Obesity and Lifestyle Study
CATI	Computer Assisted Telephone Interview
DHAC	Department of Health and Aged Care
DoHA	Department of Health and Ageing
GQF	Graduated Quantity Frequency
HDSC	Health Data Standards Committee
NDSHS	National Drug Strategy Household Survey
NHDD	National Health Data Dictionary
NHF	National Heart Foundation
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NHPA	National Health Priority Areas
NHPAC	National Health Priority Action Council
NHPC	National Health Performance Committee
NHS	National Health Survey
NNS	National Nutrition Survey
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RFPS	Risk Factor Prevalence Survey
WHO	World Health Organization



# Introduction

In June 2002, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) released its eighth biennial report on the health of Australians, *Australia's Health 2002*. This publication compiled key health statistics and analysis that were available at the time of printing.

Since its release, additional health data have been released, notably results from the 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Health Survey (NHS). One of the key areas of this survey was the collection of information on risk factors for a range of diseases.

Information on risk factors is collected in a number of population surveys by different agencies. This report presents the most current information available about a selection of these health risk factors and discusses some of the reasons why results might differ between surveys.

It is anticipated that this report will facilitate discussion between those who use health data for policy making, and will provide analysts of health data with information about the types of data currently available, its content, coverage and limitations.

For the purposes of this report, *risk factors* is the term given to a range of health related behaviours that can impact on the health of an individual, either in a negative or positive way. The risk factors discussed in this report are most likely to impact health in a negative way by increasing the risk of ill-health. However, it should be noted some health benefits, protection against hypertension and ischaemic heart disease, can be gained from low to moderate levels of alcohol consumption.

The four risk factors for which information is presented in this report are:

- physical inactivity
- overweight/obesity
- tobacco smoking, and
- alcohol consumption.

Data about risk factors can assist in explaining trends in the health status of a population and can provide insight into why some people (or groups) have better or worse health than others. Data can also be used to monitor the success of health related campaigns or to initiate health promotion interventions.

This report is structured in a way that presents each risk factor in a separate section. Each section contains a description of currently available national data, a discussion of the results and a comparison between various sources of data. These comparisons intend to assist data collection agencies and users of risk factor data by highlighting differences in the collections and further contribute to the information already available. Also included in these sections are headline indicators (relative to each risk factor) which create a focal point for those interested in health data. These indicators provide users of the data a measure to assess the impact of these risk factors against health outcomes and to monitor changes in risk behaviours over time. The indicators also assist collectors of risk factor data in the development of surveys so that the most relevant information to policy makers and researchers is collected.