5.6 Health of the very old

The proportion of the very old in the Australian population is increasing: in 2016, there are 486,700 people aged 85 and over, representing 2.0% of the population. This number is projected to more than double by 2036, to 1.0 million (3.2% of the population) (ABS 2013).

The health of people aged 85 and over

Life expectancy is increasing both at birth, and over the course of a person’s life, as most Australians enjoy better health, greater standards of living, and improved access to high-quality health care. Other topics within this publication present more information on this (see ‘Chapter 1.3 How healthy are we’ and ‘Chapter 6.17 Health care use by older Australians’). Selected health characteristics of Australia’s older people are shown here.

- A man turning 85 in 2013 could expect to live another 6.1 years, and a woman the same age could expect another 7.1 years.

- Two-thirds (65%) of people aged 85 and over rated their health as ‘good’, ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ in 2014–15. Only 9.0% of people aged 85 and over reported a ‘high’ or ‘very high’ level of psychological distress, the lowest rate in any age group (ABS 2015b).

- Most common health conditions reported by people aged 85 and over in 2014–15 included long-sightedness (61%), deafness (57%), and arthritis (49%) (ABS 2015b).

- The three most common reasons for hospitalisation for people aged 85 and over in 2013–14 were for care involving dialysis (11%), rehabilitation (8.6%), and heart failure (3.0%).

- Nearly 2 in 5 people (39%) who died in 2013 were aged 85 and over.

Between 2009 and 2013, 34 deaths per 100,000 men aged 85 and over were caused by suicide—the highest rate of suicide of any age group, although people aged 85 and over account for only a small number of deaths by suicide (ABS 2015a).

The most common cause of death in 2013 for people aged 85 and over was coronary heart disease (17%), followed by dementia (12%).
The risks to health for people aged 85 and over

Ageing may be accompanied by physiological changes, such as increased frailty, reduced mobility, and progressive loss of vision and hearing. Common risk factors can exacerbate the impact of these changes, some of which are described here.

Nearly 4 in 10 (39%) people aged 85 and over were overweight but not obese in 2014–15. A further 18% were obese (ABS 2015b).

In 2014–15, 74% of men and 85% of women aged 85 and over had a waist circumference that placed them at an increased risk of chronic disease (ABS 2015b).

Only 6.2% of people aged 85 and over had an ‘adequate’ daily fruit and vegetable consumption in 2014–15. While 65% ate the recommended 2 or more serves of fruit, only 6.9% had the recommended 5 or more serves of vegetables a day. Just 5.1% of all adults consumed an adequate amount of fruit and vegetables (ABS 2015b).

Fewer than 4.0% of people aged 85 and over were daily smokers in 2013, compared with 13% of all adults. Over one-quarter (28%) of people aged 85 and over were ex-smokers.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of people 85 and over drank alcohol, with 19% of them having at least one alcoholic drink every day in 2013. While the proportion of people who drank daily increased with age, over 20% of people aged 85 and over had never drunk alcohol.

Only 29% of people aged 85 and over were ‘sufficiently active for health’ in 2014–15, undertaking 150 minutes of physical activity over five or more sessions in a week—and 45% undertook no physical activity. Overall, 45% of adults met the threshold for ‘sufficient’ activity (ABS 2015b).

More than half (52%) of people aged 85 and over had high blood pressure in 2014–15 (the highest of any age group).

What is missing from the picture?

The very old are under-represented in many health surveys, particularly frail or ill people who are cared for in settings such as hospitals and permanent residential aged care. As a result, the proportion of frail or ill people in the population may be under-estimated, and there is limited information on their experience of, and outcomes from, interactions with the health system. In addition, data regarding the very old is not consistently collected or reported—instead, broader ‘old’ age groups, such as people aged 65 and over, are often used instead.
Where do I go for more information?

References
