

3.1 Life expectancy

Life expectancy is the most commonly used measure of the overall health of a population. It can be defined as how long, on average, a person can expect to live, based on current death rates at different ages for males and females.

Life expectancy is often expressed as either the number of years a newborn baby is expected to live, or as the expected number of years of life remaining for a person at a given age. Life expectancy changes over a person's lifetime because as a person survives the periods of birth, childhood and adolescence, their chances of reaching older ages increases.

Life expectancy varies over time and between population groups. Differences in life expectancy between population groups and geographical regions can indicate underlying health inequalities due to social, environmental or other factors.

Life expectancy at different ages

- Life expectancy in Australia for a boy born in 2012 was 79.9 years, and for a girl, 84.3 years.
- Men who had survived to the age of 65 in 2012 could have expected to live, on average, an additional 19.1 years (to 84.1 years), and women an additional 22.0 years (to 87.0 years).

Trends in life expectancy

- Life expectancy in Australia has risen by more than 30 years since the late 1800s (Figure 3.1).
- A boy born in 1890 had a life expectancy of 47.2 years; for girls it was 50.8 years.

Figure 3.1



Life expectancy by state and territory

- In 2012, babies born in the Australian Capital Territory enjoyed the longest life expectancy of any state or territory in Australia— 81.2 years for boys and 85.1 years for girls (Table 3.1).
- The Northern Territory had the lowest life expectancy—74.7 years for boys in 2012, and 80.0 years for girls.
- Indigenous life expectancy continues to be substantially lower than for the non-Indigenous population (see Chapter 7 'Indigenous life expectancy and death rates').

Table 3.1: Life expectancy (years) at birth, by sex, by state and territory, 2012

State or territory	Males	Females
New South Wales	79.9	84.2
Victoria	80.5	84.5
Queensland	79.5	84.0
South Australia	79.8	84.2
Western Australia	80.1	84.8
Tasmania	78.7	82.6
Northern Territory	74.7	80.0
Australian Capital Territory	81.2	85.1

Source: ABS 2013.

How does Australia compare?

- In 2011, Australia was ranked 6th among OECD countries for life expectancy at birth for males, and 7th for females (Table 3.2).
- The highest life expectancy at birth in 2011 was 80.7 for males in Iceland and 85.9 for females in Japan.
- Over the last 2 decades, Australia has consistently ranked in the top 10 of OECD countries for life expectancy at birth (see Chapter 9 'International comparisons').

Table 3.2: Life expectancy (years) at birth, by sex, top 10 OECD countries, 2011

Rank	Country	Males	Country	Females
1	Iceland	80.7	Japan	85.9
2	Switzerland	80.5	France	85.7
3	Italy	80.1	Spain	85.4
4	Sweden	79.9	Italy	85.3
5	Israel	79.9	Switzerland	85.0
6	Australia	79.7	Korea	84.5
7	Japan	79.4	Australia	84.2
8	Spain	79.4	Iceland	84.1
9	Netherlands	79.4	Portugal	84.0
10	New Zealand	79.4	Austria	83.9

Source: OECD 2013.

What is missing from the picture?

There are currently no national data to describe the relationship between life expectancy and long-term health conditions or lifestyle behaviours—for example, life expectancy of smokers compared with non-smokers.

Similarly, no data are available on life expectancy by socioeconomic factors, country of birth, employment, or level of education.

Where do I go for more information?

Information about life expectancy is published on the AIHW life expectancy webpage www.aihw.gov.au/deaths/life-expectancy.

References

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2008. Australian historical population statistics, 2008: life tables. ABS cat. no. 3105.0.65.001. Canberra: ABS.

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