



Life expectancy and disability in Australia: expected years living with and without disability

'Life expectancy' measures how many years, on average, a person of a given age can expect to live if current death rates do not change. While life expectancy is an important indicator of population health, people's health and wellbeing are also increasingly being considered in terms of their quality of life and functional status—with the key question being whether longer life is being exchanged for lower quality of life.

An indication of this can be provided using 'health expectancies'. 'Health expectancies' is a general term used to describe, within a person's life expectancy, the expected years spent in various health states—in this case the estimated years spent living with and without disability.

Fast facts

The disability-free life expectancy of Australians—that is, the estimated years they can expect to live without disability—has improved in recent years.



At birth, Australians can expect to live, on average, over one-fifth of their lives with some level of disability.

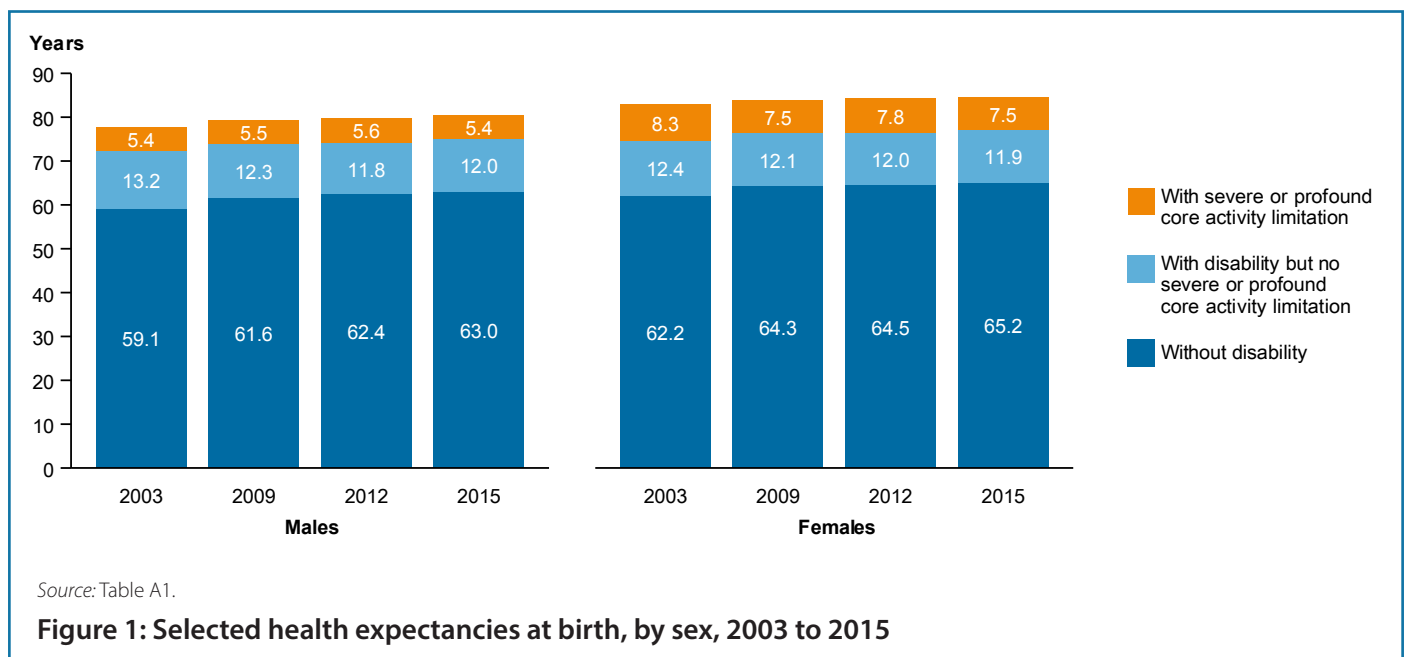


At age 65, Australians can expect to live, on average, over half of their remaining years with some level of disability.



Health expectancies at birth

In 2013–2015, life expectancy at birth was around 80 years for boys and 85 years for girls (Figure 1 and Table A1).



Boys born in 2015 could expect to live an average of 63 years free of disability and around 17 years with some level of disability, including 5 years with severe or profound core activity limitation (that is, sometimes or always needing help with 1 or more activities of self-care, mobility and communication). This equates to males living 22% of their overall life expectancy with disability, including living 7% with severe or profound core activity limitation.

Girls born in 2015 could expect to live an average of 65 years free of disability and around 19 years with some level of disability, including over 7 years with severe or profound core activity limitation. This equates to females living 23% of their overall life expectancy with disability, including living 9% with severe or profound core activity limitation.

Changes in health expectancies at birth

Between 2003 and 2015, life expectancy at birth increased for both sexes—with greater gains for males than for females (Figure 1 and Table A1).

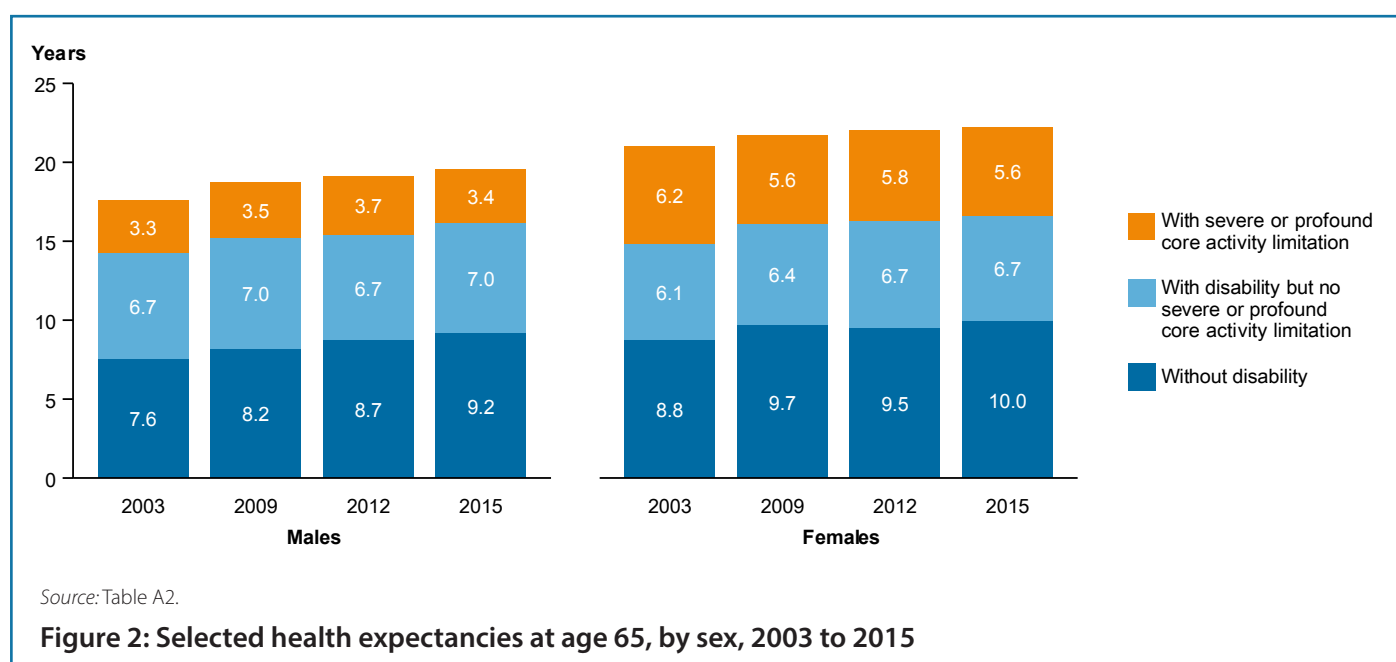
At birth, the number of expected years living without disability, and without severe or profound core activity limitation, also increased for both sexes. At the same time, both sexes gained more years living free of disability and free of severe or profound core activity limitation than with it, indicating that the disability-free life expectancy of Australians has improved in recent years (Table A3).

Health expectancies at age 65

Life and health expectancies at birth are influenced by mortality in early life. Focusing on life and health expectancies at age 65 is therefore more appropriate for monitoring healthy ageing. It should be noted, however, that health expectancies at any given age are average estimates for the total population of that age group, including people who already have a disability at that age. As such, the expected years of life with disability for a person who does not already have a disability at age 65 would be fewer than the estimates presented, which average the experience of people both with and without disability at that age.

In 2013–2015, life expectancy at age 65 (that is, the number of additional years a person aged 65 could expect to live) was just under 20 years for men and just over 22 years for women (Figure 2 and Table A2).

Men aged 65 in 2015 could expect to live, on average, an additional 9 years free of disability and around 10 years with some level of disability, including 3 years with severe or profound core activity limitation. This equates to men living 53% of their remaining life with disability, including living 17% with severe or profound core activity limitation.



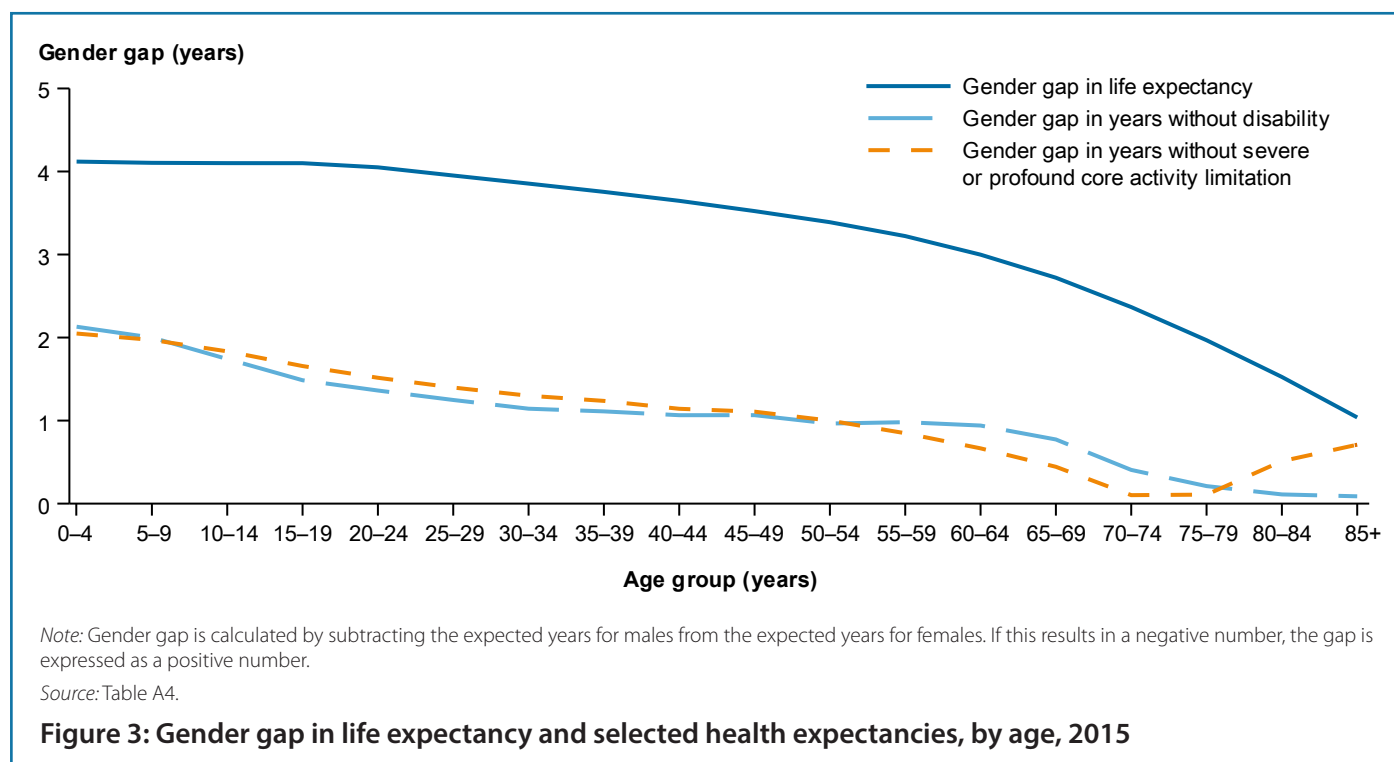
Women aged 65 could expect to live, on average, an additional 10 years free of disability and around 12 years with some level disability, including 6 years with severe or profound core activity limitation. This equates to women living 55% of their remaining life with disability, including living 25% with severe or profound core activity limitation.

Changes in health expectancies at age 65

Between 2003 and 2015, life expectancy at age 65 increased for both sexes (Figure 2 and Table A2). As the prevalence of disability clearly increases with age (see Figure 4), it could be expected that the ageing of the Australian population would result in an increase in the rate of disability over time. However, between these years, along with the increase in life expectancy, Australians at age 65 gained more years free of disability and free of severe or profound core activity limitation than with it; and women saw a slight reduction in their expected years living with severe or profound core activity limitation (Table A3). This suggests that, while the ageing of the population can be expected to lead to an increased number of older people with some level of disability, increasing longevity does not necessarily mean living with increasing rates or levels of disability.

Gender gap in health expectancies

The gender gaps in life expectancy and in the expected years living free of disability generally reduce with age (Figure 3 and tables A3 and A4).



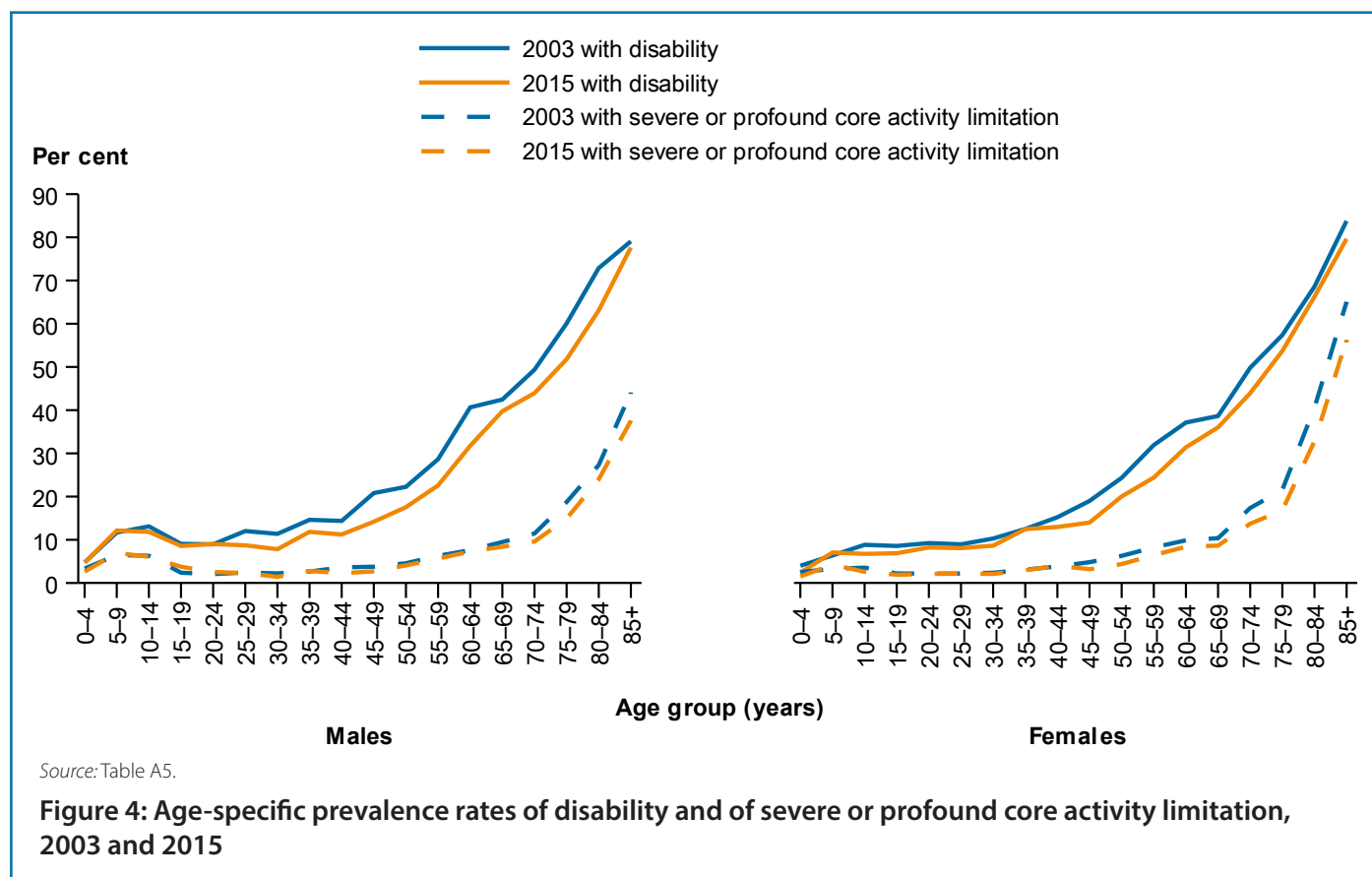
Changes in gender gap

The gender gaps in life expectancy and expected years living free of disability narrowed across most ages over time, while the gender gap in the expected years living free of severe or profound core activity limitation remained relatively steady for most ages (Table A4). These changes were attributable to greater gains in life expectancy for men than for women between 2003 and 2015, combined with sex differences in the prevalence of disability.

Disability prevalence rates

Because the expected years of life living with and without disability have been estimated using the combined data sources of mortality (life tables) and disability prevalence rates, an examination of patterns and changes in disability prevalence rates can shed light on the patterns and trends in these health expectancies.

The prevalence of disability, and of severe or profound core activity limitation, generally increases with age (Figure 4). In 2015, there were no substantial differences in the age-specific (crude) rate of disability between men and women in most age groups, but older women (aged 65 and over) had a higher rate of severe or profound core activity limitation than older men (Table A5).



Changes in disability rate

Between 2003 and 2015, the crude rates of disability and of severe or profound core activity limitation generally decreased for both sexes, and especially for older Australians (aged 65 and over) (Figure 4 and Table A5).

Because the likelihood of disability increases with age, and the age structure of a population may change over time, age-standardised rates allow meaningful comparison of the underlying prevalence rate over time. Between 2003 and 2015, the age-standardised rates of disability and of severe or profound core activity limitation also generally decreased, and particularly for older Australians (Table A6). While males made greater gains than females in terms of decreases in the overall prevalence of disability, females made greater gains in terms of decreases in severe or profound core activity limitation.

Where can I find out more?

This fact sheet is accompanied by a separately published appendix containing additional tables and an explanation of the associated methods and data sources. In summary, the health expectancies are average estimates of the expected years living with and without a disability for an age group. They have been calculated using unpublished Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) abridged life tables for 2001–2003, 2007–2009, 2010–2012 and 2013–2015, together with unpublished age- and sex-specific disability prevalence rates from the 2003, 2009, 2012 and 2015 ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC).

List of appendix tables

- Table A1: Expected years of life at birth for selected health expectancies, by sex, 2003 to 2015.
- Table A2: Expected years of life at age 65 for selected health expectancies, by sex, 2003 to 2015.
- Table A3: Life expectancy and selected health expectancies, by age and by sex, 2015 and change between 2003 and 2015 (years).
- Table A4: Gender gap in life expectancy and selected health expectancies, by age, 2003 to 2015 (years).
- Table A5: Age- and sex-specific prevalence rates of disability and of severe or profound core activity limitation, 2003 and 2015 (%).
- Table A6: Age-standardised rates of disability and of severe or profound core activity limitation, 2003 to 2015 (%).

Related publications

The following AIHW publications relating to disability might also be of interest. Disability-related publications are available online at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/disability-publications/>.

- AIHW 2016. Disability support services: services provided under the National Disability Agreement 2014–15. AIHW bulletin no. 134. Cat. no. AUS 200. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2016. Health status and risk factors of Australians with disability 2007–08 and 2011–12. Cat. no. DIS 65. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2016. Impacts of chronic back problems. AIHW bulletin no. 137. Cat. no. AUS 204. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2015. Access to health services by Australians with disability 2012. Bulletin no. 129. Cat. no. AUS 191. Canberra: AIHW.

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