

Kunttu K, Huttunen T. **Student Health Survey 2000: a national survey among Finnish university students.** Helsinki: The Social Insurance Institution, Finland, Social security and health reports 45, 2001. 217 pp.

SUMMARY

The study was carried out among Finnish university students who are entitled to health care services provided by the Finnish Student Health Service (FSHS). The aim of the study was to survey 1) the students' physical, mental and social health, 2) certain key aspects of health behaviour, including smoking, use of alcohol and narcotics, eating habits, physical activity, safety in traffic, and dental care, 3) external factors affecting health and health behaviour, including social relationships and issues pertaining to studies, livelihood and dwelling, 4) health-related attitudes and sources of information, and 5) the use of health care services and opinions about their quality. The target group consisted of Finnish undergraduate students aged 19 - 35 years. The population size was 5,030 students of whom 46.1 % were male and 53.9 % were female. The study material was gathered by means of a postal questionnaire, with three repeat questionnaires. The response rate was 63.1 %. The results are reported as observed frequencies of the measured variables, which were derived from single questions or series of questions, for gender, age group, duration of studies, study location, and field of studies.

Chronic or long-term diseases or disorders diagnosed by a doctor and showing symptoms or requiring treatment within the past 12 months were reported by 66 % of male and 76 % of female students. The largest individual group consisted of visual defects (33 %) and the second largest of dental caries (27 %). Allergic rhinitis or ophthalmia was reported by 19 %, atopic eczema by 10 % and asthma by 4 % of students. Gynecological disorders, severe acne, lactose intolerance, wisdom tooth inflammation, and migraine were reported by 5-10 % of students. Prescription drugs for various diseases were regularly used by 6 % of male and 8 % of female respondents. Self-treatment with over-the-counter and natural drugs was more common among women. Use of agents improving athletic performance, strength and power was reported by 7 % of men.

Although 86 % of respondents assessed their health good and only 2 % poor, the students quite frequently experienced different symptoms. The most common of the weekly occurring symptoms were fatigue (16 % for men, 32 % for women), neck and shoulder complaints (14 % vs. 31 %), rhinitis or blocked nose (20 % vs. 21 %), and gas pains or swelling (15 % vs. 25 %). Of various

mental disorders, sleep disorders, difficulties in concentration, tension and depression were reported to occur weekly by 10 % of male and 14-18 % of female students. Of female students, 8-9 % had symptoms suggesting various eating disorders. Unhealthy habits in one's own behaviour were most often experienced as the main threat to health; psychological stress and violence or accident followed in order.

According to the results of the GHQ 12 questionnaire, 15 % of male and 27 % of female students suffered from mental problems. Stress index, based on the mental health questionnaire, revealed that a total of 26 % of students experienced plenty of stress, women slightly more often than men. Twelve percent (12 %) of all students suffered from severe stress.

Altogether 76 % of male and 81 % of female students were non-smokers, while 9 % of male and 7 % of female students smoked daily. According to earlier studies among students, up to 35-40 % of male students smoked daily until mid-1970s. Of smokers, 40 % would like to quit smoking. Snuff was taken occasionally or regularly by 10 % of male students.

Twenty-four percent (24 %) of male and 17 % of female students had, at least, experimented with narcotics, in most cases cannabis. Seven percent (7 %) of men and 4 % of women had used drugs five or more times. Of the respondents, 3 % had experimented with medicines and alcohol in combination, 1 % with medicines, 0.1 % with intravenous drugs, and 2 % with other narcotics. Total of 87 % of respondents considered statutory regulation of the use of cannabis to be very or rather important; up to 94 % supported non-voluntary treatment of young addicts.

Alcohol was consumed on a weekly basis by 45 % of male and 27 % of female students. The AUDIT test, which is used to assess individual alcohol consumption, showed that one half of men and one quarter of women exceeded the limit (7 points) of safe alcohol consumption. About one third (30 %) of men and 10 % of women scored 11 points or more. Every fifth man and every tenth woman reported that their drinking had contributed to an accident involving them or accompanying persons. Experienced social pressure is fairly common in connection with the use of alcohol: 16 % of men and 10 % of women felt that they used more alcohol than they actually preferred because of the influence of their friends, and nearly 40 % of all students reported that having a non-alcoholic drink attracts attention. About one half of the students answered that usually there is no non-alcoholic option available.

Eating habits were examined for five major components: use of fat, salt and sugar, and intake of fibre and calcium. Students apparently attempt to adopt healthy dietary habits: 40 % of male and 65 % of female students reported they usually consider the healthiness of various foodstuffs when shopping, and 48 % vs. 33 %, respectively, did so occasionally. Health-orientedness was also seen in the choice of spread, minimal use of added salt, and frequent use of vegetables and dark bread (rye). Eating cheese, pizzas, French fries, sausages and chips, however, increases the intake of fat and salt. Forty-one percent (41 %) of men and 53 % of women reported they did not drink milk at all or one glass a day at most. – Sixty-one percent (61 %) of men and 49 % of women ate regularly their meals at a student restaurant. Fourteen percent (14 %) of men and 30 % of women were on a special diet, in most cases lactose-free or vegetarian.

About 60 % of male and 50 % of female students rated their physical condition good, and 14 % of all students rated it poor. Seventy-six percent (76 %) of men and 79 % of women trained for fitness at least once a week, and one fifth of all students trained at least four times a week. Twenty-seven percent (27 %) of men and 40 % of women walked or cycled for at least 30 minutes per day for studies or day-to-day errands. Seven percent (7 %) of men and 4 % of women reported that they did not exercise at all.

For bodyweight, 72 % of male and 75 % of female students were within the normal range. The proportion of underweight (BMI < 19) women was highest (15 %) in the two youngest age groups (19 – 24 year). The proportion of overweight (BMI ≥ 25) men increased significantly with age: In the youngest age group 16 % of men were overweight, while in the oldest age group the proportion was as high as 44 %. The corresponding figures for women were 7 % and 13 %. For subjectively estimated obesity, men's assessments were in most cases correct, while women too often estimated themselves to be overweight.

Nearly all (98 %) respondents brushed their teeth daily, and 57 % of men and 76 % of women more often than once a day. Tooth pick or dental floss was used by 57 % of men and 76 % of women, at least occasionally. Xylitol products were consumed at least once a day by 30 % of men and 40 % of women.

Accidental injuries requiring medical attention were reported by 17 % of male and 9 % of female students. The most frequent types of injuries were sports injuries (45 %), miscellaneous injuries (18 %), and injuries caused to a pedestrian or cyclist (12 %). Behaviour pertaining to traffic safety was

measured by the use of safety devices: 12 % of male and 28 % of female students wore a reflector, 98 % of respondents used the safety belt in car, and 12 % wore a bicycle helmet nearly always. Cycling was popular among students, only 12 % answered they practically never cycle.

To examine social relationships, the students were asked about social integration (size of immediate social network and intimate support network, contacts with friends, participation in organisational activities), dialogical support, and experience of loneliness. The immediate social network was small (1-10 persons) for 32 % of male and 25 % of female students, and large (over 20 persons) for about 20 % of both men and women. For one half of the students, the intimate support network consisted of 2-4 persons, for 18 % of men and 8 % of women it consisted of only one person, and 4 % of men had no such network. The youngest students had usually frequent contacts with friends, two thirds reported they spent time with friends at least twice a week. The 4 % of students who met friends less than once a month are assumed to be lonely. The same proportion of students reported they often felt lonely. In the youngest age group, 60 % men and 52 % of women participated in organisational activities at least monthly. Seventy-four percent (74 %) of men and 90 % of women had dialogical support always or frequently available, while 8 % of men and 2 % of women had practically no access to dialogical support.

For field of study, 76 % of male and 69 % of female students felt they were in the right field. About 60 % of the students under the age of 25 years felt they belonged to a study-related group, while one quarter of students lacked this experience. The support offered by the university for studies was often considered to be insufficient: 14 % felt it was completely insufficient and 26 % found it somewhat inadequate. However, 22 % of students considered guidance and counselling to be good or very good. The students did not always know whom to contact for advice: 5 % had no idea and 38 % only a vague idea of whom to contact.

During the preceding 12 months, 24 % of male and 16 % of female students had been full-time employed for over six months. Seventeen percent (17 %) of all students reported they had part-time or temporary jobs for more than one half of the year. About 60 % of students considered it necessary to work for livelihood. Thirty-nine percent (39 %) of students reported that dwelling expenses took more than half of their resources. Living was bare or uncertain for 9 % of students, most frequently in the oldest age group. Four in five (80 %) were satisfied with their current dwelling.

Ten percent (10 %) of male and 15 % of female students had during the preceding 12 months been recommended by health care professionals to change their living habits in some respect because of a disease, disorder or symptom. About one half of the students estimated that the advice given by a physician has a fairly or very powerful influence. The most important sources of health-related information in the media were TV/radio, newspapers and magazines. As to personal contacts, men had received the most important information from family members and women from physicians and friends.

The use of health services was examined for service providers and utilisation rates during the preceding 12 months. The following figures are for services provided by the FSHS : A total of 62 % of respondents had visited a nurse and 6 % a physiotherapist. General practitioners had been seen by 51 % and specialists by 29 % of students; 2 % had visited a general practitioner more than 5 times during the past year. Of all students, 4 % had seen a psychologist and 2 % a psychiatrist. Dental hygienist's services had been used by 32 % of students and 49 % had visited a dentist. The FSHS invites all first-year students to a health examination that includes both physical and dental examination. Sixty-one percent (61 %) of male and 76 % of female students had already had or intended to have this health examination; 18 % of men and 8 % of women were not interested in having either physical or dental examination, and the rest felt they needed one of the two.

Two thirds of respondents answered the question concerning the use of other health services than those provided by the FSHS. The most frequently given reasons for using other services were independent of the FSHS, but 10 % of the respondents were of the opinion that the FSHS does not offer the desired service, 15 % had not received treatment quickly enough, and 5 % had not been satisfied with the services provided by the FSHS. When asked to evaluate how they had experienced the service they had used most recently, 76-89 % of students gave positive answers. Satisfaction with planning of treatment and actual guidance was reported by 78-86 % of respondents.