

Kunttu K, Huttunen T. **Student Health Survey 2008: a national survey among Finnish university students.** Helsinki: Finnish Student Health Service, Ylioppilaiden terveydenhoitosäätiön tutkimuksia 45.

Abstract

Kunttu K, Huttunen T. **Student Health Survey 2008: a national survey among Finnish university students.** Helsinki: Ylioppilaiden terveydenhoitosäätiön tutkimuksia 45, 2009. ISBN 978-952-5696-15-8

The survey was carried out for the purpose of investigating Finnish university students' physical, mental and social health as well as their health-related behaviour, together with certain pertaining factors, including social relationships, studies, and livelihood. Additionally, their use of health care services and opinions concerning the quality of services were explored. Special themes covered sexual health, atopic eczema, asthma, acne, bullying, burnout, money games, internet usage, and travelling. Separate articles will be published to report on these special themes. The survey was constructed so as to allow comparison with the earlier nationwide health surveys among university students, carried out in 2000 and 2004.

The target group consisted of Finnish undergraduate university students less than 35 years of age. The sample comprised 9,967 students of whom 45% were men. A total of 4,984 (46% men) studied at universities of applied sciences (formerly known as 'polytechnics') and 4,983 (45% men) studied at science and art universities (in the following, the abbreviations 'ApplSc' and 'Univ' will be used, respectively). The survey was implemented as a postal questionnaire study, but filling out the questionnaire over the Internet was also possible. The questionnaire was re-sent three times, once in paper format and twice electronically. The response rate was 51% (ApplSc: 47%; Univ: 55%); for men 42% (ApplSc: 38%; Univ: 45%) and for women 59% (ApplSc: 55%; Univ: 63%). The respondents represented well the target group for all background variables. According to the non-response analysis, health problems did not accumulate among the non-respondents. The results are reported, in this publication, by age group, gender, and type of university, and in the electronic reports, also by duration of studies, study location, and field of studies. The results are compared between the two types of universities, and against the results of the nationwide student health surveys of 2000 and 2004. Summary in English..

Key words: university students, physical health, mental health, symptoms, sexual health, health behaviour, use of health care services, social relationships, studying, working, money games, internet usage, bullying, travelling

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A major part of students (60%) suffered from a chronic, long-term, or frequently recurring disease, disorder, or disability diagnosed by a physician, dentist, or psychologist and showing symptoms or requiring treatment during the past 12 months. Students at universities reported dental caries, vision disorders, and allergic rhinitis less frequently than in the preceding studies. No significant increase was observed in any of the given disease categories. Prescription drugs were used regularly by 12% of men and 40% of women, and over-the-counter drugs were used at least weekly by 11% of all respondents. Of the respondents, 83% assessed their health good and 3% poor; these proportions are similar to the results of the previous surveys. Altogether 29% of men and 47% of women had experienced different symptoms on a daily or almost daily basis. The observed gender difference applies to all questionnaire items: none of the symptoms was more frequent in men. The most commonly reported symptoms were neck complaints, skin problems, rhinitis or blocked nose, difficulties in falling asleep, fatigue, and gas pains or swelling. Of the respondents, 13% suffered, on a daily basis, from a mental symptom, 11% from a general symptom, and 11% from an abdominal symptom. Eight percent (8%) of the students slept less than 7 hours per night and 3% over 10 hours; however, 19% estimated that they rarely or hardly ever slept sufficiently. Daily tiredness was experienced by 9% of the respondents.

Of all respondents, 7% had at some point of time had sexually transmitted chlamydia. Two thirds (65%) of female students reported they had suffered from gynaecological complaints during the past 12 months, in most cases this involved menstrual pain. Problems related to sexual health were reported by 22% of men; the most frequent complaints included premature ejaculation (9%) and erection disorder (7%). Approximately 2% of the respondents had used medication to improve erection. One half of the respondents had used hormonal contraception, which is in line with the previous studies, and one third used condoms. Post-coital contraception was reported by nearly half of the female respondents. Abortions among university students were at the same level as in 2004. Of women, 6% had had an abortion. When asked if their partner had had an abortion, 5% of men answered 'yes', 90% 'no', and 5% did not know.



On the basis of the GHQ 12 questionnaire, 27% of respondents (19% for men, 32% for women) had mental problems. The most commonly reported problems included continuously experienced overstrain, a feeling of unhappiness and depression, difficulties in concentrating on the tasks at hand, and inability to sleep because of worries. According to mental health screening, 27% of all students experienced considerable stress. Most frequently stress was related to public performance and difficulties in getting a grip on one's studies. About every fifth student had a negative perception concerning their mood, planning of future, and own resources and capabilities. Empowering factors included human relationships and sexuality. Perceived mental problems and stress experiences were similar among students of both types of universities and, among those studying at universities, were roughly as common as they were in 2004.

One tenth of female students had symptoms suggesting eating disorders, and 22% of female students had had eating-related symptoms previously during their puberty. Altogether 37% of the respondents had experienced bullying during their school years. The students at universities had experienced bullying more frequently than the students at universities of applied sciences; of male students at universities, every fifth reported that they had been bullied for several years. One quarter of students had experienced bullying during their studies.

A total of 37% of men and 20% of women were overweight; obesity was most common among the students at universities of applied sciences. Obesity increased along with age: 28% of men in younger age groups were overweight, while the proportion in the oldest age group was 46%. Of women, 9% were underweight. Women assessed themselves as being overweight more frequently than they actually were; in men, the trend was opposite.

As regards physical exercise, every tenth student did not train for fitness at all, 36% trained two to three times a week, and 24% at least four times a week. Female students at universities exercised more frequently than female students at universities of applied sciences. Nearly 40% of the respondents reported they exercised in connection with daily activities for at least 30 minutes per day. Students at the two types of universities differed



most in their use of physical exercise facilities or services offered by the university itself. As many as 29% of female students at universities exploited facilities or services offered by the university, whereas the corresponding percentage among female students at universities of applied sciences was only 5; for men, the proportional shares were 16% and 10%, respectively. Irrespective of this, the university students used also commercial or municipal services or those offered by clubs or associations equally frequently as the students at universities of applied sciences. Permitted substances enhancing athletic performance were used by 15% of male and 4% of female students. The use of any banned doping preparations was very rare.

In terms of dietary issues and healthy nutrition, female students at universities showed the highest awareness. Of them, 75% paid attention to the healthiness of food when purchasing food or meals; in contrast, only 38% of male students at universities of applied sciences reported such behaviour. Health awareness among students at universities had increased in comparison to the preceding surveys. One quarter of the respondents was on a special diet. Of the students, 54% had their main daily meal usually at a student restaurant. Use of added salt at meals was reported rarely. More than 90% of respondents ate dark (rye) bread every day. Low-fat or light spread was used most frequently (60%); the usage had become more common in comparison to the results of the survey in 2000 (32%). Altogether 17% of students did not drink milk at all. Male students at universities of applied sciences drank most frequently (51%) at least 3 glasses of milk per day, whereas the least frequent milk-drinkers (27%) were female students at universities. Women ate more commonly than men fruit, berries, fresh vegetables, and porridges. These food categories also revealed the greatest differences between the two types of universities. In comparison to men, women consumed more commonly sweets and sweet pastries, while men were more frequent consumers of beverages with added sugar and foods rich in fat. Dental hygiene habits were poorer among men than among women, and poorer among students at universities of applied sciences than among university students.

In smoking, differences emerged between students at the two types of universities, but not between the genders. Among students at universities, daily smoking continues to be



infrequent (6%). Of students at universities of applied sciences, 16% were smokers; the youngest male students smoked rarely (7%). In comparison to the results of the survey in 2004, smoking has decreased among male, but not female, students at universities of applied sciences. Of men, 5% used snuff or snus on a regular basis. Every fifth student (23 %) had experimented with or used narcotics; this was reported most frequently by male students at universities.

Of all students, 7% were teetotallers. Mean alcohol consumption was 4.8 kg per year for men (ApplSc: 5.0 kg/year; Univ: 4.6 kg/year) and 2.2 kg per year for women. Of male students, every fourth used alcohol excessively, while the corresponding percentage for female students was 12%. Of men, one quarter drank at least 6 portions at a time weekly or more frequently, and drinking 10 or more portions at a time was also common among male students (ApplSc: 27%; Univ. 18%). In terms of AUDIT scores, alcohol consumption was within the safe limits (0-7 points) for 46% of male students and 70% of female students. Social pressure towards the use of alcohol continues to be rather common: 14% of the respondents experienced they were forced to drink more alcohol than they actually preferred, non-alcoholic beverages are not served in general, and having a non-alcoholic drink attracts attention. Mean alcohol consumption among male students at universities had increased from the preceding surveys, which is explained by the increased consumption within the oldest age group. The proportional shares of men and women with minimal consumption have remained unchanged, whereas the share of those drinking excessively has increased slightly.

Approximately 8–9% of male and 2% of female students reported behaviour suggesting a game addiction. A total of 42% of the students had been, at least quite often, surfing on the Internet for a longer time they originally meant to; for 13% of the respondents this had happened frequently. One fifth of male and 14% of female students estimated that the time spent on the Internet disturbed their studies, and the disturbing effect on the diurnal rhythm was equally frequent. The problem was emphasized among male students at universities.



Of the respondents, 35% had travelled abroad for a period of over 10 days at least once during the past 12 months; in most cases (73%) the destination was in Europe, while every fifth had travelled to Asian destinations. The majority of the journeys were for vacation; about one fifth reported travelling was related with their studies. Male students took less careful precautions before travelling: only 54% of them had taken all recommended vaccinations and prophylactic medications, while the corresponding figure among women was 65%. Altogether 8% of the respondents had travelled without valid travel insurance. Every fourth respondent had fallen ill or caught a disease during or after the journey, every fifth had been robbed or assaulted or had an accident during the journey, and 10% had visited a doctor in the country of destination.

Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the respondents classified themselves as full-time students (ApplSc: 84%; Univ: 72%). As to the field of studies, 67% felt they were in the right field, and 9% thought they were in the wrong field. The students at universities perceived their study performance poorer than expected more frequently (21%) in comparison to the students at universities of applied sciences (15%); in both types of universities the experience was more common among men than women. However, 14% of respondents (ApplSc: 18%; Univ: 11%) perceived they performed better than expected. One quarter of the respondents did not perceive their studies as meaningful; the experience was slightly more common among students at the universities of applied sciences. Every fourth respondent considered the guidance and counselling they had received for their studies as being adequate, whereas 12% found it completely insufficient. Social anxiety causing problems in study situations was equally common among students at both types of universities. The most frequent situations causing anxiety included public speaking or presentations, speaking in foreign languages, and participating in seminars.

Of the respondents, 14% experienced their livelihood as scarce, while 47% estimated they are managing well. University students estimated their financial situation better than the students at the universities of applied sciences. The proportion of those estimating their living as bare or uncertain was highest among the female students at universities of applied sciences (18%). Slightly over one half of the students reported that housing



expenses took up more than half of their available means. Two out of three had been full-time employed during the past 12 months, and almost every fifth for over six months. Approximately 40% of the respondents had worked half-time on a regular basis. Work periods of less than one month were also common among students. Given all types of work, 58% responded their work had been related to studies.

Two thirds of the respondents had a regular partnership. Of the respondents, 9% had children and 3% were expecting a child. In general, students wish to have children; however, 6% do not wish to have any children at all. Wish to be a parent has become more general among students: in 2004 a total of 12% of university students responded that they do not wish to have any children. Of the respondents, 42% live single in their own households, 36% live together with their spouse but without children, and 7% live in a commune or a shared household. A total of 74% of the respondents spent time with friends in their leisure at least on a weekly basis. Slightly over half of the students (ApplSc: 49%; Univ: 67%) participated in association activities. Only 55% of the students felt they belong to a study-related group. Various measures indicated that 5-6% of the students were lonely. Dialogical support was insufficient for nearly every third male student.

The insufficiency of municipal health care services offered for students became obvious when they were asked about the use of professional health care services of various types. In addition to and instead of student health care services, students at universities of applied sciences used the services provided by municipal health centres, and they also visited specialists less frequently. Furthermore, they used less frequently oral health care services than the students at universities did. In general, students at both types of universities were highly satisfied with the contents of their health care visits (ApplSci: 83-85%, Univ: 89%). Students are well capable of identifying the issues they need assistance for. Wishes to receive assistance in matters related to health, studies, or control of life are well in line with various problems as emerged in this survey. Besides problems related to studies, other topical issues include stress management skills, social anxiety, problems related to self-esteem or human relationships, as well as nutrition, physical exercise, weight management, and ergonomics.



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