

Summary

The University Student Health Survey 2012 was conducted to investigate students' physical, mental and social health, certain key aspects of health-related behaviour, as well as the use of health services and opinions concerning the quality of the services. In addition, the study explored a range of factors related to health, health behaviours and study ability, such as social relationships, studying and subsistence. Special themes in the 2012 survey included learning difficulties (dyslexia, in particular), gambling addiction and Internet use, pain in the head and facial area (bruxism), panic anxiety syndrome, sexual problems, vulvodynia, experiences of bullying, stalking and violence, as well as the cultural and social meanings of physical activities. Furthermore, the survey aimed to provide information about immigrant students. The majority of the special themes will be discussed in separate articles.

The survey was designed so as to allow for comparison with the earlier nationwide health surveys among university students, carried out in 2000, 2004 and 2008. The study protocol was approved by the Medical Ethics Committee of the Hospital District of Southwest Finland, and the participating students gave their informed consent by voluntarily responding to the questionnaire.

The target population consisted of undergraduate students, aged under 35 years and studying in Finnish universities. The sample consisted of 9,992 students, of whom 47% were men. The proportional shares of students in academic universities (Univ) and universities of applied sciences (UAS) were equal, and the gender distribution was equal as well. The self-report survey was implemented as a postal questionnaire, but it was also possible to complete the questionnaire online. Four reminders were sent electronically, and a reminder questionnaire was sent once by mail.

The overall response rate was 44% (UAS 40%; Univ 49%). The response rate was 35% for men (UAS 31%; Univ 39%) and for women 52% (UAS 47%; Univ 57%). **Except for the low male response rate, the respondents represented well the target population for the background variables.** In this publication, the results are reported by age group, gender, and educational sector, and in the electronic reports, also by duration of studies, study location (or region), and field of studies. The results are compared between the two educational sectors (UAS vs. Univ), and against the results of the nationwide university student health surveys of 2000, 2004 and 2008.

A significant proportion of students (65%) 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 over the preceding 12 months. The prevalence of various diseases has remained rather unchanged from year to year, but the proportions of diagnosed depression and anxiety syndrome have doubled since the year 2000. For Univ students, the proportions in this survey were 7.9% and 5.7%, respectively. A total of 84% of the

respondents perceived their health as being good, and only 3% as poor. Altogether 29% of men and 46% of women had experienced a particular symptom on a daily or almost daily basis. The proportions in terms of perceived health and experienced symptoms were similar to those in the previous surveys. Of different daily or weekly occurring symptoms, the most common were tiredness/fatigue and upper back/neck problems, both in men and women. Other common symptoms included skin problems, runny/blocked nose, problems in falling asleep and gas pains/feeling bloated. Of the respondents, 12% suffered, on a daily basis, from a mental symptom, 11% from a general symptom, and 10% from an abdominal symptom.

Two thirds (64%) of female students reported they had suffered from gynaecological complaints over the preceding 12 months; in most cases, this involved menstrual pains (46%) or irregular periods (20%). Approximately 10% reported disturbingly heavy menstrual periods or pain during intercourse. For men, 27% of respondents reported having problems related to sexual health, most commonly premature or delayed ejaculation. Of different birth control methods, the use of contraceptive pills was reported by 47% of women and 39% of men. The use of a contraceptive vaginal ring or patch was also reported, which increased the share of hormonal contraception. A total of 45% of men and 36% of women reported the use of condoms.

Symptoms suggesting eating disorders were reported by every tenth female student, but only 2% of women had a diagnosed eating disorder. According to the results of the GHQ-12 questionnaire, 28% of the respondents (men 20%; women 33%) suffered from mental problems. The most commonly experienced problems included continuous overstrain, a feeling of unhappiness and depression, difficulties in concentrating on the tasks at hand, and loss of sleep because of worries. According to the mental health screen, 30% of all students experienced considerable stress. The most frequent causes of stress were performing in public and difficulties in getting a grip on one's studies. About every fifth student had a negative perception concerning their mood, plans for the future, and own resources and capabilities. Empowering factors included human relationships and sexuality, and for the majority of respondents, the process of planning for the future, personal resources and mood were perceived as positive. Getting a grip on one's studies and performing in public, on the other hand, were positively perceived by less than one half of the students. Experienced mental problems and stress did not differ between Univ and UAS students. Mental problems have become increasingly common among Univ students since the year 2000.

A total of 41% of male students and 23% of female students were overweight. Major obesity (BMI 30kg/m² or over) was found in 8% of male and 6.5% of female students. Overweight and obesity increased along with age: while 30% of men in younger age groups were overweight, the proportion in the oldest age group was as much as 57%. Overweight was more common among UAS students as compared to Univ students. In both men and women, overweight and obesity have continued to become increasingly common since the year 2000. Underweight was reported by 9% of women and only 2% of men. Women estimated themselves as being overweight more often than they actually were; in men, the trend was the opposite.

The use of health services reflects not only the need for health services among the student population, but also the availability and accessibility of services. The reported use of professional health care services of various types revealed clearly the lesser supply of municipal health services for students, as compared to the services offered by the Finnish Student Health Service. In addition to and in place of student health services, the UAS students used other services provided by municipal health centres. The number of appointments had declined since the year 2008, except for the services of the psychologists and psychiatrists of the Finnish Student Health Service. In both sectors of higher education, the students were quite satisfied with the contents of the appointments within student health services (UAS 86%; Univ 88–89%).

Students were asked to identify matters in which they would like to receive help. The responses were in line with the impression gained through other survey questions, suggesting that the students are well aware of the problematic issues in their lives. Matters related to studies and mental well-being, such as stress and time management, need of support for study-related problems and study skills, social anxiety, human relations, and self-esteem emerged as the most important issues. The UAS students hoped, more often than Univ students, for help in matters related to weight management and physical activity.

In terms of different health behaviours, dental hygiene habits were poorer among men than among women, and poorer among UAS students than among Univ students. Differences were observed in both the tooth brushing frequency and the use of toothpaste and dental floss. Altogether 79% of female Univ students brushed their teeth twice a day, as is recommended, whereas only 62% of male Univ students and 54% of male UAS students did so.

As regards physical activity and exercising, 24% of all students trained for fitness at least four times a week, 36% trained two to three times a week, and 10% did not train at all. The proportion of those exercising a lot had slightly increased. When comparing the two educational sectors, it was found that the proportion of those who have minimal physical activity was slightly larger among UAS students. A total of 47% of male and 55% of female respondents reported they exercised in connection with daily activities for at least 30 minutes per day. Over an hour a day was reported by 14% of Univ students and 17% of UAS students.

The greatest difference between Univ and UAS students was found in the use of physical exercise facilities or services offered by the university itself. As many as 30% of female Univ students took advantage of facilities or services offered by the university, whereas the corresponding percentage among female UAS students was only 8%; for male students, the proportional shares were 17% and 8%, respectively. Irrespective of this, the Univ students also used commercial or municipal services or those offered by various clubs or associations as often as UAS students did. One third of Univ students reported that their personal experiences and images of physical activities provided specifically for students had increased their interest in physical activity, while only every tenth among the UAS students reported such development. More often than Univ students, the UAS students experienced that the expense of various

activities and the lack of suitable training facilities had impeded their engagement in physical activity.

Only 1.6% of men and 0.4% of women had, at some point in their lives, used a doping substance in order to improve their sports performance, strength or physical appearance.

Awareness about health issues in relation to nutrition was the highest among female Univ students: when buying food, 77% of them considered its healthiness. In both types of universities and for each gender, awareness of and consideration for the healthiness of food has become more common. The increase has been the greatest among male UAS students, of whom 49% now reported they often consider the healthiness of food. Of all students, 52% usually had their main daily meal at a student restaurant. In comparison to men, women were more often eating healthy foods that are recommended for use on a daily basis, such as fruit, berries, vegetables and wholegrain products. Dairy products were an exception: these were equally often used by men and women. Altogether 12% of students did not drink milk or cultured milk at all. The use of fruit, berries and vegetables was more common among Univ students, as compared to UAS students. Over 60% of all students had some sort of wholegrain products nearly every day. For bread, the recommendation is at least 4 slices a day, and this was achieved by 45% of men and 30% of women. The most frequently used spread on bread was a butter-vegetable oil mixture, which was used by 41% of students, and the second most common was a low-fat margarine spread (made with vegetable fat), which was used by 25% of students. Butter was used by 6.6% of students, suggesting that the proportion of butter users has doubled in four years. About one half of the students usually had both lunch and dinner, but every fifth skipped either meal at least three days a week.

In terms of smoking, differences emerged between students of the two types of universities, but not between the genders. Of the respondents, 5% of Univ students and 13% of UAS students smoked on a daily basis. A total of 83% of Univ students and 75% of UAS students were non-smokers. Of the respondents, 13% had quit smoking. The favourable trend of decreased smoking has continued both in Univ and UAS students. Of men, 5% used chewing tobacco (snuff) on a regular basis and 8% occasionally. The use of other tobacco products was rare. One quarter of the respondents had tried smoking a water pipe, but only 4% of men and 2% of women had used it more than 20 times.

Of all students, 8% were teetotallers. Self-reported alcohol consumption was 4.3 kg per year for men (UAS 4.5 kg/year; Univ 4.1 kg/year) and 2.0 kg per year for women. Of male students, every fifth reported a significant use of alcohol, while the corresponding percentage for female students was 11%. On the other hand, 24% of men and 41% of women used very little alcohol. The percentages for heavy drinkers were 3.5% for men and 1.3% for women. When drinking, less than one third of Univ students and over 40% of UAS students drank with the intention to get drunk (that is, men had at least 7 and women at least 5 portions at a time). Having 10 portions or more on an occasion was rather common, especially among male UAS students (UAS 22%; Univ 13%). In terms of the AUDIT scores, alcohol consumption was within the safe

limits (0–7 points) for slightly more than one half of male students and 78% of female students. However, 28% of males and 13% of females scored 11 points or more. On the basis of both self-reported alcohol consumption and AUDIT scores, alcohol consumption has decreased from the level in 2008. Men, in particular, seem to have reduced their use of alcohol.

When asked to assess their use of various intoxicating agents, the proportion of those who reported that they smoked too much or were addicted to smoking was in line with the proportional share of daily smokers. In contrast, only 1.5% of males and 0.5% of females felt that they used all too much alcohol or were addicted to alcohol. One fifth of men and 12% of women felt that they drank slightly too much.

Of the respondents, 19% (men 24%; women 17%) had experimented or used a drug (narcotics), a medicine, or medicines together with alcohol for intoxication purposes. Cannabis was the most commonly used drug; however, the use of all the different narcotics presented in the question was reported. The use of and experimenting with narcotics became more common in Univ students from 2000 until the year 2008, but now the increase has levelled.

Of all students, 60% reported they had played a gambling game over the preceding 12 months; men more often than women. Over the preceding 12 months, 7% of men and 2% of women had felt, at least occasionally, that gambling may be a problem for them. When compared with the 2008 survey, the time spent on the Internet was more commonly experienced as causing problems for studies. A positive answer was given by 28% of men and 22% of women, whereas the corresponding percentages in the previous survey were 19% and 14%. Nearly one fifth of respondents reported that the time spent on the Internet causes problems in their daily rhythm.

A total of 27% of UAS students had previously graduated with a vocational diploma, 6% were studying for their second UAS degree, and 2% had a previous university degree. Among Univ students, 18% had completed their bachelor's degree, 6% had a master's degree, and 8% had a lower UAS degree.

As for the field of studies, 69% of all students felt they were in the right field, and 8% thought they were in the wrong field. In comparison to UAS students, the Univ students had more often been disappointed with their own study success. A total of 26% of Univ students reported their study success had been worse than expected, as compared to their own personal aims, whereas the corresponding figure for UAS students was only 17%. The experience was more often true for men than for women in both types of universities. In terms of the study guidance and counselling provided by the university, the situation has improved from the previous years for Univ students. Now, 28% of them rated the guidance and counselling they had received as good or very good, whereas in the previous surveys, the corresponding figures varied from 21% to 23%. The share of those who find the guidance and counselling as totally inadequate is now lower than ever (11%).

The risk of study burn-out was elevated for approximately 10% of the respondents. Women experienced more study burnout than men did. Students are commonly worried about their studies, every fifth of all students reported they brood a lot over matters related to the studies even in their free time. Of the respondents, 14% felt overwhelmed by the work related to their studies. This was more usual among women, and, in particular, among female UAS students (18%), whereas male Univ students (9%) reported such an experience most rarely. To measure study burnout and enthusiasm, students were asked, among other things, if they find their studies to be highly meaningful. A total of 44% of students agreed, and 28% were clearly enthusiastic about their studies. One quarter of students were inspired by their studies, but only every tenth felt energetic and vigorous when studying.

Of the respondents, 5% had a diagnosed learning difficulty or illness/disability that affects their learning. Learning difficulties were more common in female UAS students (7.3%) than in other groups. The most frequently diagnosed difficulty was dyslexia (73%). One half of the respondents reported they had not been provided with any special arrangements in the matriculation examination because of their learning difficulty.

Of the respondents, 46% estimated that they are doing well financially, while 15% viewed their livelihood as scarce and uncertain. The Univ students assessed their own financial situation as being decent more often than UAS students did. The proportion of those considering their livelihood as scarce or uncertain was highest among female UAS students (20%). Of the respondents, 62% reported that they had to go to work to ensure their subsistence, and an equally large proportion of students received economic support from their parents or relatives. Slightly over one half of the students reported that housing expenses took up more than half of their available means (UAS 58%; Univ 49%).

Altogether 71% of the students had had a full-time job over the preceding 12 months. One fifth had worked for a total of 4–6 months and nearly one fifth for more than 6 months, so apparently part of their full-time work takes place during the academic year. Naturally, being employed in a full-time job is more common in the older age groups. A total of 55% of the respondents had worked half-time on a regular basis. Shorter work periods of less than one month were also commonly reported. Working during studies has become increasingly usual during the past four years. The proportional share of Univ students who have had a full-time job for more than 3 months has been at the same level since 2000, at around 38%. However, the proportion of students employed in part-time job for a total of more than 6 months has gradually risen from 17% to 27%. Of all those in some form of employment, 57% responded that their work had been related to their studies.

Two out of three students had a steady partnership, and the proportion was higher in older age groups. In the oldest age group (30–34 years), however, nearly 30% of men and 20% of women did not have a steady partnership. Of the respondents, 9% had children and 2% were expecting a child. A total of 60% of the students were planning to have a child or more children in the future, while about 30% had not thought about it. Of the respondents, 40% lived alone in

their own household, 37% lived together with their spouse but without children, and 9% lived in a commune or shared a household. While only 5% of all students lived at their parents' home, up to 20% of the males in the youngest age group did so.

In terms of social relationships, every tenth male student lacked dialogical support, while the corresponding figure for women was 4%. Of men, 70% had proper dialogical support, in other words, they could openly discuss their matters and problems with someone close to them if they wished; the corresponding figure for women was 84%. Various scales indicated that 5–7% of the students felt they were lonely. A total of 60% of all students felt they belong to a study-related group, and 31% felt they did not belong to any group. The feeling of belonging to a group was most frequent among those under 25 years of age. Among Univ students, the experience of belonging to a study-related group has become more common since the year 2000, increasing from 48% to the current 65%.

Nearly one half of the respondents had experienced bullying during their school years. One fifth of the respondents had been subjected to bullying for several years. During their university studies, 5% of respondents had felt they had been bullied by other students, and 6.5% that they had been bullied by staff members. A total of 42% of men and 24% of women had experienced physical violence at some point of their lives, and 39% of men and 22% of women had been threatened with violence. Every tenth woman and 1% of men had experienced sexual violence. Of men, 21% had experienced violence in childhood, 40% in adolescence and 22% as young adults. The corresponding shares for women were 18%, 28% and 17%.