



Trends in healthy and disability-free life expectancy in the UK and other high-income countries: a systematic review

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

We conducted a systematic review of trends in healthy and disability-free life expectancy¹ in the UK and other high-income Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD) countries. It is important to compare UK trends to similar countries, including those where life expectancy had previously stalled (the Netherlands), or is currently lower (the US), or higher (for example France, Sweden) than the UK. We also report evidence on whether inequalities in healthy or disability-free life expectancy had narrowed or widened.

Findings

Twenty-eight publications met the review criteria with trend periods ranging from 6-40 years, between 1970 and 2017. Eleven studies reported trends in the UK, of which four reported forecasted trends. The remaining studies reported trends in Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Republic of Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, and the US. Three also reported trends across multiple countries.

Evidence from this review identified four broad findings:

- In the UK, healthy and disability-free life expectancy have increased, but the gains have not kept pace with the gains in life expectancy, suggesting an expansion of ill-health and disability. Though most non-UK studies had expansion of disability and ill-health, there were exceptions with greater gains in healthy life expectancy in Korea and for women's disability-free life expectancy in Sweden;
- Although the UK trends in disability-free life expectancy appear congruent with the evidence of an increase in disability prevalence, other countries (US and Sweden) have seen declines in the prevalence of disability;
- In UK and most non-UK studies there was clear evidence of differences between men and women in trends with gains in healthy and disability-free life expectancy being greater for men, whilst women were living with longer periods of disability;
- Growing inequalities in healthy life expectancy between those living in the most and least deprived areas was evident for men in England and Wales. For non-UK studies, inequality is generally assessed by level of education, the educational gap in disability-free life expectancy having narrowed in Denmark but widened in Belgium and Norway.

Conclusion

Analytical differences between studies limited a detailed comparison of trends but evidence suggests that the UK and the majority of OECD high-income countries are experiencing an expansion of disability in later life, with implications for the adequate provision of care services. Further research should elicit the contribution of widening inequalities to disability expansion, specifically whether similar trends are being experienced by the most and least advantaged.

¹ Healthy life expectancy is an estimate of how many years a person might be expected to live in a 'healthy' state (usually based on self-reported or self-perceived health). Disability-free life expectancy is an estimate of how many years a person might be expected to live without disability.

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