

Fifth of people in UK will suffer from poor health before age 30

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Researchers said that a high proportion of the population will not reach their pension age in good healthPETER NICHOLLS/REUTERS

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A fifth of people in England cannot expect good health beyond their 30th birthday, according to analysis of the nation's wellbeing.

By the age of 50, most people will have at least one long-term health condition, such as serious mental illness, asthma or diabetes.

The figures, based on data from medical records, calculate that the amount of time during which people can on average expect to be in good health is more than a decade less than official estimates.

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Delaying the onset of such significant health conditions by even one year could save the NHS more than £3 billion a year, researchers said.

The research, by Outcomes Based Healthcare (OBH), uses data from GP and hospital

records to determine people's "healthspan" — the length of time they can expect to live in good health.

It found that the six conditions most likely to mark someone's health beginning to decline were depression, high blood pressure, asthma, cancer, coronary heart disease and diabetes.

"We have not had this visibility before," Jonty Heaversedge, medical director for primary care and digital transformation at NHS England, said. "If we continue to focus solely on treating the consequences rather than the causes of ill health, we will ultimately not be able to afford our health system.

"As we progress our plans to more integrated health and care services across England, I would encourage anyone involved in planning, paying for or delivering health services to start measuring healthspan."

A similar measure used by Public Health England (PHE), called healthy life expectancy, is based on a survey of about 0.5 per cent of the population in which people are asked to rate their own health.

Last July, based on that measure, PHE said that "a significant proportion of our population cannot expect to live to their pension age in good health", with figures showing that the average woman had poor health from the age of 64 and man from 63. The average lifespan for men in England is about 79 and for women 83.

Early analysis from OBH suggests that 21 per cent of the population has a healthspan of less than 30 years, 13 per cent between 30 and 40 years, and 15 per cent between 40 and 50. About 18 per cent can expect a healthspan of between 50 and 60, 14 per cent between 60 and 70, and 19 per cent more than 70.

Rupert Dunbar-Rees, a former GP who founded OBH and was selected as an NHS innovation fellow in 2016, said: "We need to look at health through a different lens, one that focuses on how we prevent and delay people developing significant health problems.

"We cannot continue to run a system which just delivers excellent treatment once people have already started to become unwell. Particularly as there are now indications that we are seeing this happen earlier in people's lifetimes."

The company estimates that prolonging healthspan nationally by a year would give 1.3 million people an extra year of good health, saving £3.4 billion a year. The calculations are based on an assumed cost of a healthy year of £1,000 and a non-healthy year of £3,500. Prolonging it by three years would gain 4.1 million extra healthy years and save up to £10.3 billion.

Dr Dunbar-Rees said: "Health systems often already know exactly what kinds of activities and interventions can help prevent and delay the onset of such conditions, but their impact has been hard to quantify in real time. This makes it difficult for healthcare organisations to develop compelling business cases for implementing them."

Peter Goldblatt, senior adviser at University College London's Institute of Health Equity, said: "This study is a useful reminder that people can become ill, developing life-changing conditions, at any age. As well as our age, sex and the genes that we inherit, our health is driven by the conditions in which we live our lives — the circumstances in which we are born, grow, live, work and age."

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