

Heger, Dörte

Research Report

Living longer: Years spent in (bad) health?

RWI Impact Notes

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Living Longer: Years Spent in (Bad) Health?

A rise in life expectancy for older age groups is accompanied by increasing limitations with everyday activities

Due to medical and technological progress, life expectancy has increased significantly over the past decade. A large share of this increase occurs for people over the age of 50. However, the rate of illness in the population is simultaneously increasing because the average number of people affected by disease in each age group is rising. At the same time, the limiting effect of diseases remains unchanged. New research findings for European countries show that, as a consequence, additional years of life are spent in bad health.

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MAIN FACTS

Over the past decade, life expectancy has risen across all age groups. A large proportion of this increase occurred within the age group 50+.

The incidence of diseases rises with age and has increased in every age group over the past decade. At the same time, the relationship between diseases and limitations in everyday activities remains equally strong over time.

New European results show that additional years of life are spent in illness rather than in a healthy state.

How did life expectancy change over time?

Over the past decade, life expectancy has steadily increased across all age groups. On average, individuals born in 2004 in the European countries studied by RWI had a life expectancy of around 79 years. Those born in 2014 could already expect more than two additional years. Likewise, older age groups have an increased life expectancy. About 80% of the total increase occurs in the age group 50+. Above all, this is due to medical and technical progress: diseases that would have been fatal a few years ago now yield a higher patient survival rate. More research is needed on whether medical and technological progress also reduces the limiting influence of diseases and thus leads to additional years spent in good health – or whether the years with health limitations are extended.

Are the additional years of life spent in good or in bad health?

There is no consensus in the scientific literature on this. Some studies suggest that due to a healthier lifestyle and the associated lower incidence of chronic diseases, the period of increased illness is

condensed into the time shortly before death. The extended life time would therefore mainly consist of healthy years. Other studies suggest the contrary: They show an increase in periods of illness. The different results may be due to differences in the time spans used by the respective studies and in the countries involved. A new analysis by RWI now presents results based on current data from ten European countries, including Germany, Spain, Sweden and the Netherlands.

What does the RWI study conclude?

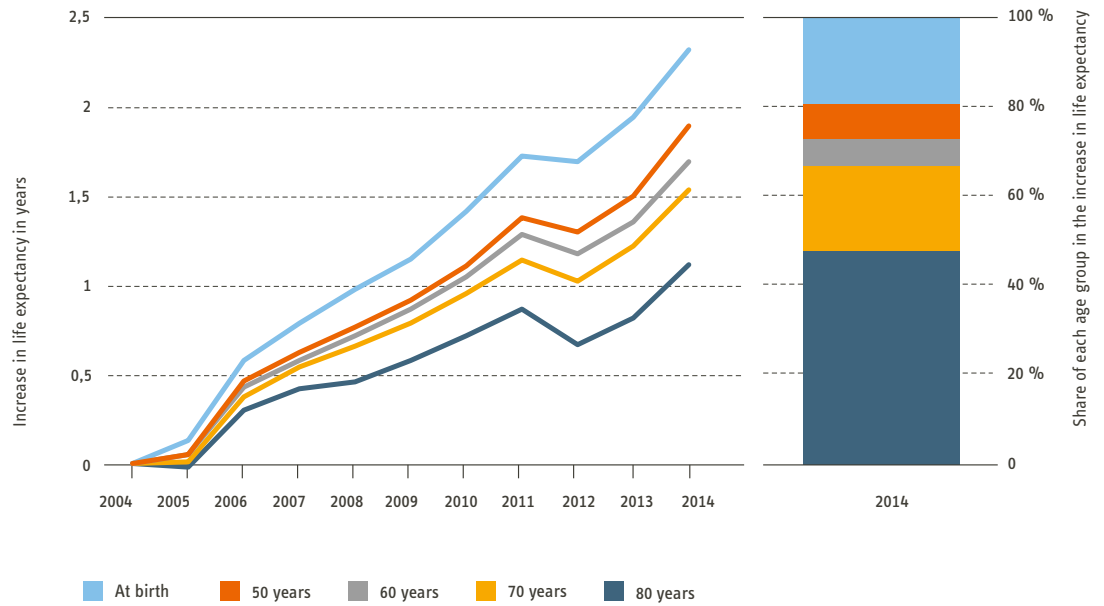
A comparison of health data for the population group 50+ from 2004/05 with data from 2010/11 shows that the average number of diseases in every age group has increased. At the same time, the limiting effect of diseases remained unchanged. As a result – and because people are getting older – the proportion of those in the population with health limitations is increasing. For European countries, the RWI study provides an indication that additional years of life are spent in illness and with limitations in everyday activities rather than in good health.

Source:

Heger, D. und I.W.K. Kolodziej (2016): Changes in Morbidity over Time – Evidence from Europe. Ruhr Economic Paper #640 http://www.rwi-essen.de/media/content/pages/publikationen/ruhr-economic-papers/rep_16_640.pdf



Over 80% of the Increase in Life Expectancy Is Attributable to the Age Group 50+



Note: Increase in life expectancy between the years 2004 and 2014. Average values for Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, and Spain.

Source: RWI calculations based on Eurostat (life expectancy by age).

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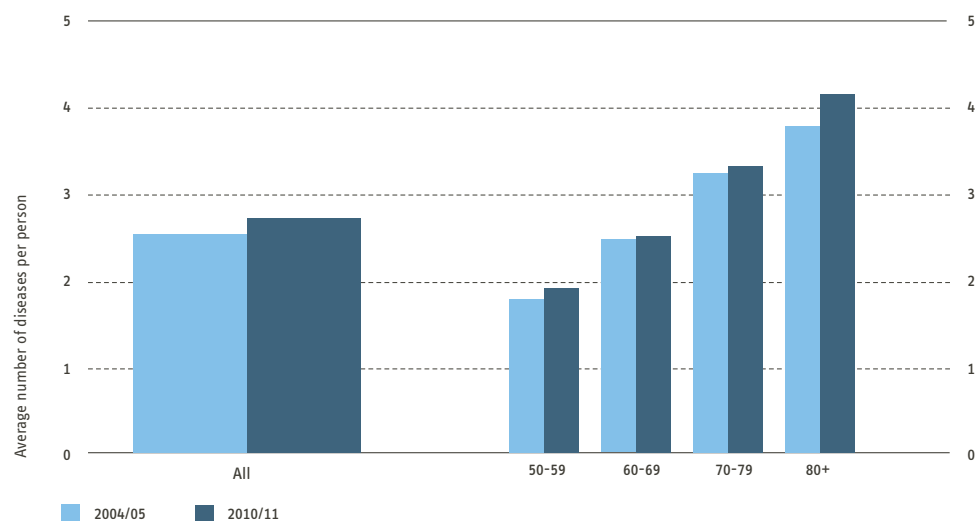
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The Average Number of Diseases Increases in All Age Groups



Source: RWI calculations based on SHARE.