

Research reveals crucial insights into children's health behaviours

Report presents data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey 2022

Study highlights concerns over mental health and wellbeing, with older children and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds more vulnerable

Children report less alcohol, tobacco and cannabis use but an increase in vaping

Thursday May 2, 2024: Research by University of Galway has shed new light into the health behaviours of children and adolescents in Ireland, emphasising areas of progress and concern that require urgent attention.

Commissioned by the Department of Health, the findings are from the latest Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey conducted in 2022.

More than 9,000 children, from a representative sample of 191 primary and post-primary schools nationwide, were asked to report on a series of questions related to their lifestyles, behaviours and experiences.

Key findings for 10-17 year-olds include:

Alcohol, tobacco - some improvements

- 69% of children reported never drinking alcohol (66% in 2018)
- 9% reported having ever smoked (12% in 2018)

Vaping - girls and older children more likely to report use

- 18% report having ever used vapes or e-cigarettes
- 13% report having ever used vapes or e-cigarettes in the last 30 days

Cannabis - older children more likely to report cannabis use and no social class difference found

- 6% reported cannabis use in the last 12 months, (8% in 2018)

Mental health and wellbeing - older teenage girls less likely to report high levels of life satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing.

- 54% of 10-17 year-old girls report high life satisfaction, compared to 69% of boys
- 22% of girls and 33% of boys report feeling very happy with their lives at present

Covid - the impact of the pandemic was reported on for the first time in the 2022 survey

- 40% of children reported that the public health restrictions had a negative impact on their mental health and school performance
- Girls and older children were more likely to report these negative impacts

Bullying - Boys and children from the middle social class group are more likely to report bullying others at school once or more in the past couple of months

- 29% reported being bullied once or more in the last couple of months (30% in 2018)
- 13% report having bullied others once or more in the last couple of months (14% in 2018)

Cyberbullying - Girls, younger children and children from lower social class groups are more likely to report being victims once or more in the past couple of months

- 18% report being cyberbullied (15% in 2018)
- 9% report having taken part in cyberbullying, with boys and those from lower socioeconomic groups more likely to have reported taking part (8% in 2018)

Dietary behaviour - some positive findings, with more children eating fruit and vegetables

- One in four children report eating fruit and 23% report eating vegetables every day
- 19% report never having breakfast on school days (13% in 2018)
- 18% report having gone to school or bed hungry because there was not enough food in the house (19% in 2018)
- 13% report trying to lose weight (14% in 2018)

Sexual health - a decrease in numbers reporting condom use

- One in four 15-17 year-olds report ever having sex (25% in 2018)
- 48% of those report that they or their partner used a condom at their last sexual intercourse (62% in 2018)
- And 34% of those who report having sex also report that they or their partner used no contraception at their last sexual intercourse (22% in 2018)

Exercise and Physical Activity - recurring finding of low numbers of children meeting physical activity guidelines

- Only 24% of children report reaching the recommended level of 60 minutes physical activity every day of the week (22% in 2018).
- 50% of children report participating in vigorous exercise four or more times per week (49% in 2018).
- Boys, younger children and children from higher social class groups are more likely to report participating in vigorous exercise four or more times per week.

Menstrual health and period poverty - being reported for the first time as part of the survey in 2022

- 10% of girls reported experiencing period poverty - defined by ever being unable to afford period products
- 60% reported ever missing school due to period symptoms

Sun safety

- 85% of children report always or sometimes using sunscreen on a sunny day, (80% in 2018)
- 75% of children report having been sunburnt at least once last summer (73% in 2018)

Professor Colette Kelly, Project leader in the Health Promotion Research Centre at University of Galway, highlighted the significance of the findings, particularly given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: "These insights provide a critical understanding of children's health behaviours during a time of unprecedented challenges. Overall, the findings underscore the need for targeted interventions and supports to ensure the well-being of Ireland's youth, for example there are indications of a positive shift in healthy eating, yet far too many children go hungry at times. One concerning trend is that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds consistently report more negative health outcomes. This highlights the urgent need to address health disparities and to ensure equitable access to resources for all children."

Aoife Gavin, Senior Researcher at the Health Promotion Research Centre, and lead author of the report, commented on findings related to mental well-being and happiness: "Findings concerning wellbeing, happiness and life satisfaction, particularly among older teenage girls are deeply troubling. While the impact of COVID-19 can be seen to exacerbate these challenges, it's crucial to recognise that this trend existed pre-pandemic. This is now a longstanding issue requiring immediate attention and while further research is underway to understand these findings, interventions are imperative to reverse this concerning trajectory and to ensure the wellbeing of our youth."

Dr Andras Kolto, Senior Postdoctoral Researcher at the Health Promotion Research Centre at University of Galway, said: "The decline in condom use, and overall contraception use among adolescents is alarming. With only 48% reporting condom use at the last sexual intercourse, and a notable increase in those using no contraception, urgent action is needed to address Relationships and Sexuality Education in schools, to enhance education for young people and increase access to resources, such as sexual health services for our youth."

Professor Kelly emphasised the need for continued data collection: "This data is not merely numbers - it is the foundation upon which effective policy and society changes are built. Without robust data and thorough analysis, we cannot hope to enact meaningful improvements in the lives of children in Ireland. Our ambition remains clear: to collect data that informs evidence-based recommendations, driving positive policy changes that will enhance the well-being of future generations."

The report is available online at

<https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/hbscdocs/nationalreports/HBSC-2022-National-Report.pdf>

Media queries to pressoffice@universityofgalway.ie

Professor Colette Kelly, Ms Aoife Gavin and Dr András Költő are available for interview.

Notes for editors

The HBSC is an international study, carried out in collaboration with the World Health Organization every four years. Currently 51 countries take part in the study. This is the seventh time Ireland has participated.

More information on HBSC Ireland available at: <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/hbsc>