

3.8 Health and health-related behavior

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Executive summary

The relation between health and employment participation among older workers has been studied extensively. The predominant conclusion is that poor health is the most predictive determinant for exit from work, mostly through the pathway of a disability pension. However, the relation appears to be somewhat more complicated, especially with regard to early retirement, where both poor and good health may play a role.

Many factors affect the relation between health and employment participation and many of them are interdependent. For this reason, research into the role of health should not be limited to the single relation between one health factor and employment participation, but should adopt a multifactorial and interdisciplinary approach.

Core findings

The relation between health and employment participation has been studied extensively, and the general conclusion is that health plays an important role in early exit from the work force. Core findings are:

- A recent review showed that poor self-perceived health is a strong predictor of disability pension and to a lesser extent of unemployment and early retirement.
- The same review showed that having a chronic disease or a mental health problem was a risk factor for disability pension and unemployment, but not for early retirement.
- Studies that use a 'purged' or 'objectivised' health measure conclude the same regarding the relation between health and work force participation. Hence, no matter

how health is measured, it remains a key determinant of employment participation.

- A recent review about health related behaviour showed that obesity, and to a lesser extent, overweight predicted disability pension, but not unemployment and early retirement. Findings with regard to the lack of physical activity were inconclusive. Alcohol abuse and smoking are studied less extensively in relation to employment participation. The few existing studies suggest that these health-related behaviours are generally linked to an early exit from the work force.

Analysis of research

- The relation between health and employment participation has been studied in several disciplines, including health sciences, (health) economics, econometrics, sociology, gerontology, psychology, and demography. The different approaches used by social scientists (i.e. sociologists, gerontologists or health scientists) and those applied by (health) economists or econometrists produce complementary results.
- Quantitative methods dominate the research on health and employment participation. However, lately more studies were carried out using qualitative or mixed methods.
- Most studies on the relation between health, health-related behaviour and employment participation focus on the phenotypes of disability pension, unemployment and early retirement. Lately, more attention has been given to the "competing risk perspective". In this view, it is assumed that the probability of one exit route, i.e. early retirement, disability pension, or unemployment is dependent on the probability of

other exit routes. However, most studies still adopt a traditional perspective under which the relationship between health and solely one exit route is studied.

- Most studies use multivariate analyses to take into account the contribution of other relevant factors. However, many studies are solely focused on the relation between one health determinant and employment participation. They hardly consider the complexity of the relationship or possible interaction effects between variables. Factors, typically considered as covariates or moderating factors, are work characteristics and demographics. Potential determinants from other domains are often neglected. Only a few studies include a macroeconomic perspective.
- The majority of studies uses survey data. Self-reported measures have their drawbacks since they may be subjectively biased. The combination with register data still offers many interesting research opportunities. Yet, the access to these data is limited in most countries.

Consideration of the cross-national diversity

- Most studies on the relation between health, health-related behaviour and employment participation originate from North-Western Europe, i.e. Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.
- In some studies, transnational differences have been found in the association between poor health and employment. They may reflect country-specific legislation and institutions as to the pension scheme, the eligibility for disability benefits, or the labour market situation. Yet, a stratified analysis for European regions showed that self-perceived health was the most predictive measure for exit from paid employment, most notably through disability.

Research needs

- More studies are needed that adopt a multifactorial approach. Although most studies include demographics and work factors in their analysis of the relation between health and employment participation, the macroeconomic situation or other contextual factors are seldom included. In addition, interactions between health and the different factors influencing employment participation may be studied more extensively.
- The relation between health and the different exit routes varies. Moreover, the probability of one exit route is dependent on the probability of other exit routes.

Therefore, future research should consider a “competing risk approach”.

- Qualitative studies are needed to understand individual decision-making within a complex structure of influencing factors on different levels.
- The use of register data would offer excellent research options overcoming many of the drawbacks associated with the use of survey data only.

Research policy options

Research about the role of health should not be limited to the single relation between one health factor and employment participation, but should adopt a multifactorial and interdisciplinary approach.

The full version of this report is available on the project's website at:

➔ www.jp-demographic.eu/about/fast-track-projects/understanding-employment

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