

Irish people think they are healthier than they really are

Findings of the Irish Life 2023 Health of the Nation annual research report

- *Over the last 5 years people are exercising less and are putting on weight*
- *The Irish Life National Health Score has decreased for a fourth consecutive year*
- *28% of respondents felt stressed and anxious most of the time*
- *The number of people feeling lonely or isolated continues to rise, having nearly doubled since 2019*

September 2023 – Irish Life has today unveiled the findings from the 2023 Health of the Nation research which shows a noticeable decline in overall physical and mental health. This is despite people thinking their health is improving.

The research* reveals that although people who completed the survey said they were putting more effort into being healthier than before, the average weight is higher than 2018, the amount of daily exercise is lower than 2019 and the overall health score continues to decrease. Interestingly, there is also a “say / do gap” in terms of mental health and social connection. The research noted improvements in mental resilience and indicators of social health, yet there was also a rise in distress and anxiety levels and feeling lonely or isolated is higher than ever.

Commenting on the Health of the Nation research, **Professor Niall Moyna, from the School of Health and Human Performance at DCU**, said: *“We’re continuing to see the ramifications of Covid with a number of health indicators not yet rebounding to pre-Covid levels. With an average BMI of 27.4 in 2023, which is classified as ‘overweight’, as a nation we still have a lot of work to do. The health implications of an overweight nation are dire, with obesity being an important risk factor for many chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, and some forms of cancer. One of the simplest ways to improve health is to get more exercise, however we’re continuing to see overall exercise rates drop – with only 13% of people exercising more than six hours per week which is down from 23% in 2019, a really noticeable decline. It’s a slippery slope and we as a nation need to be taking the necessary precautions to turn our health around.”*

Stacey Machesney, Head of Health and Wellbeing at Irish Life, said: *“While there are some improvements, our National Health Score tells us that people’s health is continuing to decline year on year, despite people believing we are taking steps to become healthier. With the health score declining for a fourth consecutive year, we need to be addressing the contributing factors, such as decreased physical activity and worsening mental health. We need to address the gap between what people are thinking and what they are actually doing.”*

“These small declines in the Irish Life National Health Score may not be initially jarring, but when they continue to worsen year on year, we begin to see things such as chronic disease become more and more common. We can see this through the Irish Life Health data which also is showing an increase in overall claims. Rather than treating these chronic diseases as they come, we need to be looking at how to prevent them and that starts with taking care of your overall health - every day. Irish Life supports – such as our MyLife health and wellbeing rewards app, which is available free to everyone – put services directly in the hands of those who need it and gives them the opportunity to

address their health concerns in an easy and accessible way. We need to be providing our nation with supports, like the MyLife app, to ensure we're tangibly monitoring these health efforts and the real impact they have on the overall health of the nation."

Chartered Psychologist, Michelle Dolan, C Psychol, PsSI, Senior Wellbeing Consultant Manager, Irish Life, said: *"Social connection and mental wellbeing were severely affected by the pandemic and we as a nation, are still finding our way back to our 'relative normal'. It is commendable how we have worked through these difficulties in an unprecedented few years. What we're seeing now is an increase in distress and higher likelihood of social anxiety. This is likely a long-term effect from the pandemic with people now returned to work and taking part in more frequent social situations, which they might not be used to following years of social distancing. We also need to consider developmental challenges that younger people have faced, as we see most social anxiety disorders picked up throughout adolescence and then taper off as people grow up. What we need to remember is the positive effects that in-person interactions can have not only on your social connection but also on your overall health and resilience."*

Details of the report:

Eating and Exercise

- Respondents in the 2023 research were more likely to claim healthy eating habits compared to 2022, with:
 - 66% claiming to eat a balanced diet – compared to 61% in 2022,
 - 72% claiming to listen to their body and stopping when full – compared to 64% in 2022,
 - 46% claiming to go out of their way to eat a healthy and nutritious diet – compared to 37% in 2022.
- Despite these claims, the Irish Life National Health Score has decreased from 537 in 2020 to 523, marking the fourth consecutive year of decline.
- The average weight has increased by 1.3kg from an average weight of 78kg in 2018 to 79.3kg in 2023.
- Furthermore, overall exercise rates continue to decline with only 13% exercising more than six hours per week – compared to 23% in 2019.

Mental Health and Mental Resilience

- In terms of mental health, interestingly, we are also seeing a gap between how people perceive their mental resilience and how distressed they feel. The research found very positive improvements in terms of their perception of mental resilience with 91% of people believing they can overcome challenges, 88% feeling strong in times of uncertainty and 86% feeling hopeful they can achieve their goals.
- Despite these positive sentiments, the report continues to see negative outliers compared to years previous, with almost half (47%) of respondents reporting severe or moderate distress compared to 41% in 2022.
- Notably, both males and females are now equal in distress levels, with male severe distress rates increasing significantly by 50% in one year up from 14% in 2022 to 21% in 2023 – on a par with female severe distress rates (22%).

- Additionally, we are now seeing the highest ever rates of self-classified stress and anxiety, with the incidence of severe distress amongst younger adults increasing significantly - from 27% in 2022 to 38% in 2023.

Social Connection

- The Health of the Nation report provided many indicators of social health improving in comparison to pre-Covid levels as well as 2022, however levels of feeling lonely or isolated are also higher than ever.
- The Social Health Score has improved to 454 from 433 in 2022, with a 4% rise in those describing themselves as 'Good' socially.
- There have been improvements across many indicators of social connection, with people now reporting a better sense of belonging, being better integrated into society and having a stronger social network of close friends and family.
- Despite this positive trend, we are still seeing a stronger sense of feeling lonely or isolated – up 17% from 2019 – and peaking amongst young adults (under 35) and those who are single.
- The research also found a spike in social anxiety, with a 12% increase in people being worried about situations in which they might “make a fool of themselves”, this social anxiety indicator has increased from 40% in 2022 to 52% in 2023.

The Health of the Nation research has been conducted on an annual basis since 2018, aside from 2021 where restrictions were in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full Health of the Nation research results can be accessed [here](#).

ENDS

For further information, media queries or requests for interviews with Stacey Machesney or an expert from our health panel, please contact:

Kelly French or Aisling Hinchy, Drury

Kelly.French@drury.ie 083 320 9740

Aisling.Hinchy@drury.ie 087 696 6884

Notes to Editor:

Methodology

*The Health of the Nation Research was completed in conjunction with Behaviour & Attitudes Research in June 2023, using a nationally representative samples of 1,102 adults in Ireland. This sample was quota controlled to be representative of the ROI population aged 16+ based on Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2016 figures for gender, age, region, and area, as well as Association of Market Research Organisations (AIMRO) agreed figures for social class. National population norms are in line with CSO.

The Health of the Nation research was completed in 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022 and 2023. Not all areas of interest were examined in each wave of research, which is why there is a mix of 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2022 statistics in the comparisons.

About MyLife Health Score (Used to calculate the National Health Score)

The MyLife Health Score is a scientifically calculated number from 1 to 1,000. The higher your Health Score, the healthier you are considered to be. The Health Score is a scientific way to

measure your health in one easy to understand, single metric. You can then make small lifestyle changes to improve this over time. These positive lifestyle changes can have wide-ranging health and wellbeing benefits. It is an indicator of your health and wellbeing; however, it is not a diagnostic tool and does not substitute the diagnosis of your medical professional. The Health Score was developed by our technology partner and data processor Dacadoo in collaboration with leading health experts.

About Irish Life

Irish Life is one of Ireland's leading financial services groups, now taking care of over 1.5 million customers. We help people to confidently prepare for and embrace life's changes with our wide range of health, life, pension, and investment solutions.

We are part of the Great-West Lifeco group of companies, one of the world's leading life assurance organisations. Great-West Lifeco and its subsidiaries have over CAD\$2.6 trillion in consolidated assets under administration* and are members of the Power Financial Corporation group of companies.

Irish Life delivers innovative solutions for personal and corporate customers, backed by the highest standards of service. And as part of Great-West Lifeco, we have access to experience and expertise on a global scale, so we can continuously enhance our leading range of services and solutions.

*As of 30 June 2023