Citation

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Current Health Atlas of the Scientific Institute of the AOK (WIdO)

‚Back' costs 11.6 billion euros per year

The Health Atlas editions of the Scientific Institute of the AOK (WIdO), which have been published annually since 2019, make the health situation of all residents in Germany's 400 districts and cities transparent. The current edition of the Health Atlas, published at the end of 2023, focuses on the topic of back pain and its prevalence in the German population. The report also focuses on causes, consequences, prevention options and consequences for the healthcare system.

>> According to the results of this Health Atlas*, a total of 26.2 million people in Germany were affected by medically documented back pain in 2021. This corresponds to 31.4% of all inhabitants and thus almost every third person in Germany.

The frequency of back pain increases significantly with age; women are affected more frequently than men in almost all age groups.

Sparsely populated rural regions more affected - due to age, deprivation, obesity and depression

At 33.7%, medically documented back pain is more common in sparsely populated rural areas than in metropolises. There, the incidence is only 28.9%. However, this difference can largely be explained by differences in the regional population structure according to age and gender. In a ‚fair comparison', the spread between the settlement structure types is significantly smaller after age and gender standardisation and only ranges from 33.3% in sparsely populated rural districts to 30.9% in metropolitan areas.

Materially and socially disadvantaged people suffer more frequently from back pain than people with a high social status. This correlation, which according to the report is known from numerous studies, is also evident in a regional comparison in Germany. According to the Robert Koch Institute's ‚German Index of Socioeconomic Deprivation' (GISD), regions with a lack of material and social resources, taking into account factors such as income, employment or education, have an above-average number of people with medically documented back pain.

In the most economically and socially disadvantaged regions, the prevalence of back pain is 34.2%. In regions with the best initial material and social situation, only 28.8% of the population is affected by back pain. The difference between the less and more deprived regions is therefore 5.4 percentage points. Only a small part of this difference can be explained by regional differences in age and gender structures.

According to the WIdO, further research is needed to determine the role of individual risk factors such as health behaviour or psychosocial factors and the role of environmental factors such as the working and living conditions of people with back pain in the observed correlation with deprivation.

Obesity is a further risk factor for the development or chronification of back pain. Obesity is present in cases of pronounced overweight. The Health Atlas therefore analysed the correlations between medically documented obesity and back pain at regional level. These analyses confirm the correlations known from the scientific literature: in regions with a higher proportion of obese people, more people are also affected by back pain. For example, the prevalence of medically documented back pain in regions with a high proportion of obese people is 35.9%, whereas in regions with a low proportion of obese people it is only 28.2%, which is significantly lower. This means that the regions with the highest proportion of obese people have a 7.7 percentage point higher incidence of back pain. If the regional differences in age and gender structures are taken into account, the differences are only slightly reduced. This means that the differences in the age and gender structure of the population can only explain this correlation to a limited extent.

Another significant risk factor for back pain is depression, as is already known from existing studies. The analysis of the regional frequency of depression in connection with medically documented back pain shows a clear statistical correlation: In regions with a high proportion of patients with depression, back pain occurs more frequently (34.6%) than in regions where there are fewer people suffering from depression (29.3%). This means that the difference in the prevalence of back pain is 5.3 percentage points. However, these differences cannot be explained by the age and gender differences between the various regions in Germany.

Consequences for the healthcare system

Back pain is associated with high social costs (absenteeism, early retirement) and also leads to high utilisation of the healthcare system. In 2021, the ICD diagnosis M54 (‚back pain') was the most frequently documented ICD three-digit diagnosis from the outpatient sector; it was present in 26.9% of all insured persons (Schmuker et al. 2023).

The Federal Statistical Office reports medical costs for diseases of the back (‚dorsopathies', ICD diagnoses M45-M54) totalling 11.6 billion euros for 2020 (Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) 2022a), which corresponds to 2.8% of the total costs of 431.8 billion euros. From a cost perspective, back problems are therefore more significant than diabetes mellitus, strokes or depression. <<

* https://t1p.de/2ylkw