Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy at age 65

All OECD countries have experienced tremendous gains in life expectancy at age 65 for both men and women in recent decades. On average across OECD countries, life expectancy at age 65 increased by 5.7 years between 1970 and 2019 (Figure 10.3). Seven countries (Australia, Finland, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg and Spain) enjoyed gains of a least seven years over the period; two countries (Lithuania and Mexico) experienced an increase of less than three years between 1970 and 2019.

On average across OECD countries in 2019, people at age 65 could expect to live a further 19.9 years. Life expectancy at age 65 is around 3.3 years higher for women than for men. This gender gap has not changed substantially since 1970, when life expectancy at age 65 was 2.9 years longer for women than men. Among OECD countries, life expectancy at age 65 in 2019 was highest for women in Japan (24.6 years) and for men in Switzerland (20.3 years). It was lowest for women in Hungary (18.6 years) and for men in Latvia (14.4 years).

While all OECD countries experienced gains in life expectancy at age 65 between 1970 and 2019, not all additional years are lived in good health. The number of healthy life-years at age 65 varies substantially across OECD countries (Figure 10.4). In the European Union (EU), an indicator of disability-free life expectancy known as "healthy life-years" is calculated regularly, based on a general question about disability in the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey. On average across OECD countries participating in the survey, the number of healthy life-years at age 65 was 9.8 for women and 9.7 for men in 2019 – a markedly smaller difference between men and women than that of general life expectancy at age 65. Healthy life expectancy at age 65 was close to or above 16 years for both men and women in Norway and Sweden; for men, this was nearly 3 years above the next-best performing countries (Iceland and Ireland). Healthy life expectancy at 65 was less than 5 years for both men and women in the Slovak Republic and Latvia. In these countries, women spend more than three-quarters of their additional life-years in poor health, compared with one-quarter or less in Norway and Sweden.

Gains in life expectancy at age 65 have slowed in recent years. This can be explained in part by health challenges that disproportionately affect older populations, including the severe influenza epidemic of 2014-15 – which affected frail and older populations in particular. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically affected life expectancy in 2020, especially among older populations. Across 21 OECD countries, 93% of COVID-19 deaths have occurred among adults aged 60 or older, including close to three-fifths among people aged at least 80 (OECD, forthcoming[3]). Between 2019 and 2020, life expectancy at age 65 declined in 18 of the 25 OECD countries with available data, falling by an average of 7.4 months (7.1 months for women and 7.7 months for men). As population ageing continues, OECD countries will need to anticipate health challenges – like the COVID-19 pandemic, influenza and other infectious disease outbreaks – that can disproportionately affect older people, and be prepared to address them, including by ensuring high vaccination rates among older populations.

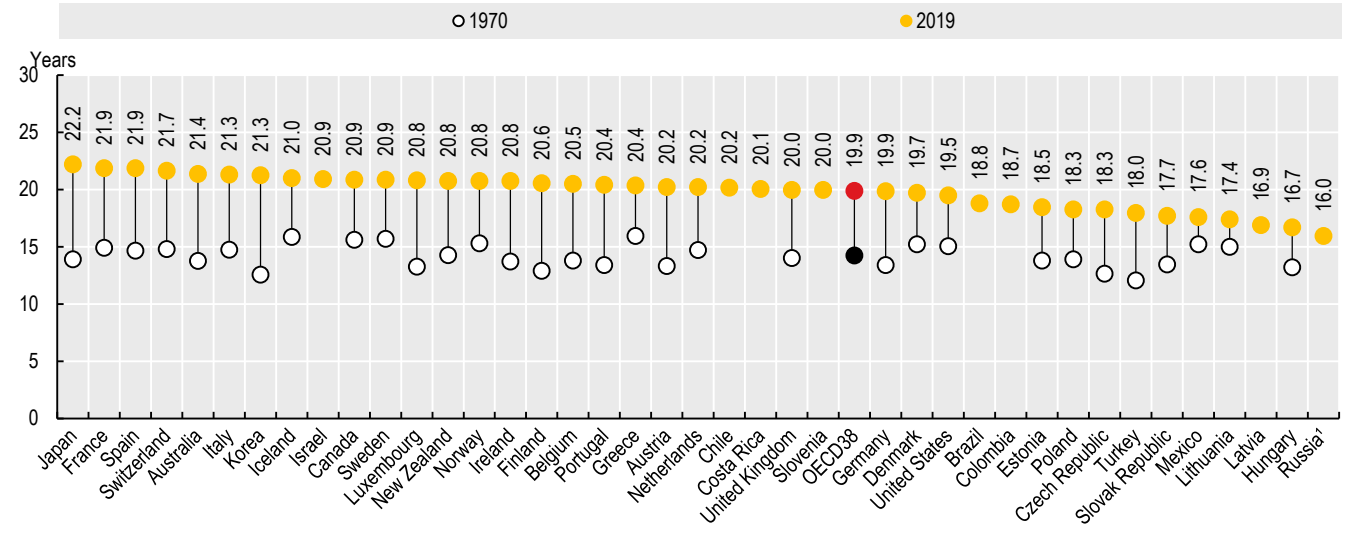
Definition and comparability

Life expectancy measures how long on average a person of a given age can expect to live, if current death rates do not change. However, the actual age-specific death rate of any particular birth cohort cannot be known in advance. If rates are falling, as has been the case over the past decades in OECD countries, actual life spans will be higher than life expectancy calculated using current death rates. The methodology used to calculate life expectancy can vary slightly between countries. This can change a country's estimates by a fraction of a year. Life expectancy at age 65 is the unweighted average of the life expectancy at age 65 of women and men.

Disability-free life expectancy (or "healthy life-years") is defined as the number of years spent free of activity limitation. In Europe, this indicator is calculated annually by Eurostat for EU countries and some European Free Trade Association countries. The disability measure is based on the global activity limitation indicator (GALI) question in the EU-SILC survey: "For at least the past six months, have you been hampered because of a health problem in activities people usually do? Yes, strongly limited / yes, limited / no, not limited". While healthy life-years is the most comparable indicator to date, there are still problems with translation of the GALI question, although it does appear to reflect other health and disability measures satisfactorily (Jagger et al., 2010[1]).

Data on the population structure have been extracted from the OECD historical population data and projections (1950-2050). The projections are based on the most recent "medium-variant" population projections from the United Nations World Population Prospects – 2019 Revision.

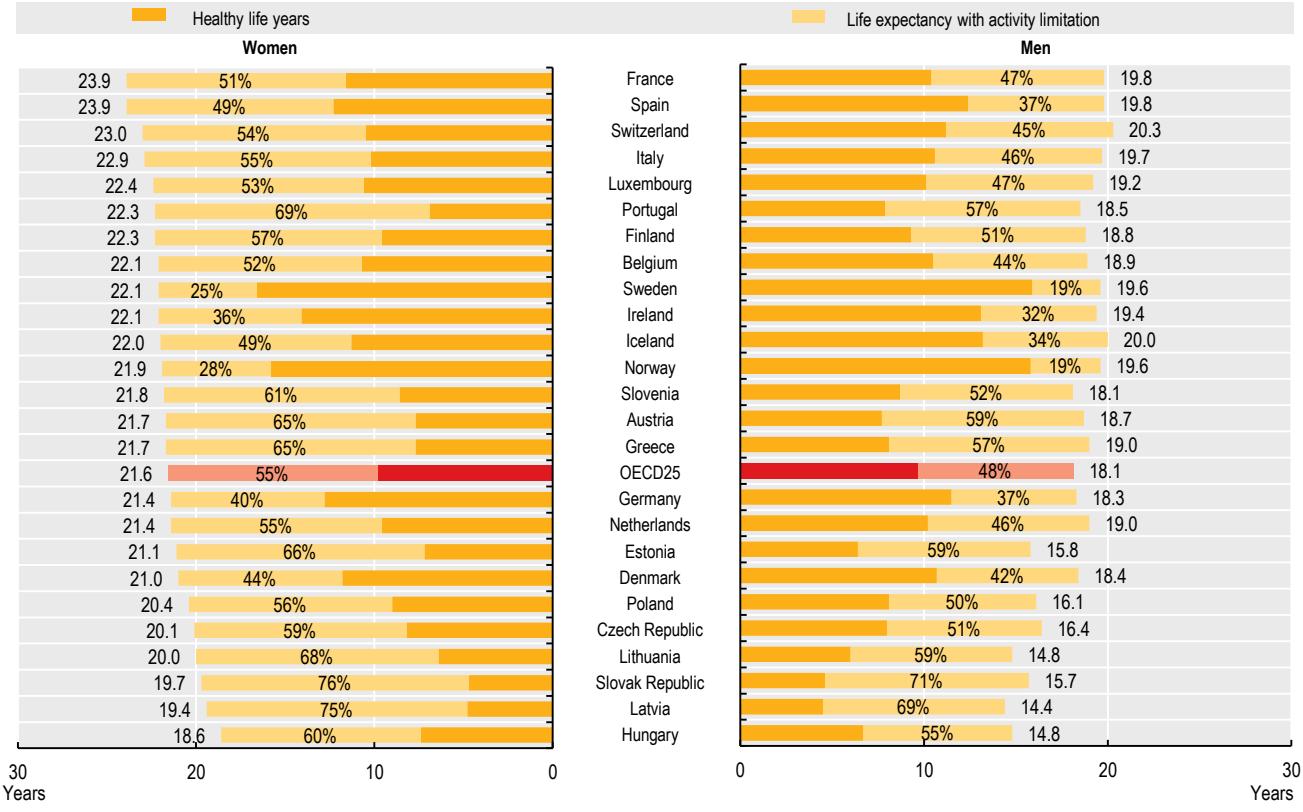
Figure 10.3. **Life expectancy at age 65, 1970 and 2019 (or nearest year)**



1. 2018 data.
Source: OECD Health Statistics 2021.

StatLink https://stat.link/3j9peq

Figure 10.4. **Life expectancy and healthy life-years at age 65, by sex, 2019 (or nearest year)**



Note: Data comparability is limited because of cultural factors and different formulations of questions in EU-SILC.
Source: Eurostat database.

StatLink https://stat.link/78sq5l