
Embargoed until 4am 05.02.2021

Health Self-Perceptions? Most of Us Are Dreamin’!

A national survey shows Australians, including Tasmanians, are living in a fool’s paradise when it comes to perceptions of our own physical and mental health.

Despite confessing to consuming too few vegetables and fruit, typically being overweight or obese, frequently drinking too much, and having diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health issues, the inaugural *Australian Health Indicators survey* has shown almost 8 in 10 Australians say they’re in “Excellent, Very Good or Good” health!

The online survey of more than 2000 Australians was undertaken by IPSOS and commissioned by Members Health Funds Alliance, the representative group for 26 Australian not-for-profit health insurance funds, with almost 4 million members.

Members Health CEO, Matthew Koce, said the results highlight that we over-estimate our health, and in doing so risk putting our actual health and wellbeing in jeopardy.

“Tasmanians self reported having the highest level of health of populations in any state or territory,” he said.

“84% of Tasmanians reported their health as being somewhere between ‘Excellent’ and ‘Good’, with the next highest self-raters being Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia at 80%, with ACT recording a national low of 62%.

“Contrast these self-perceptions of ‘Good’ to ‘Excellent’ health with our behaviours, and we see a very different picture.

“More than 90% (92%) of respondents fessed-up to eating too few vegetables (84% of Tasmanians), 34% acknowledged drinking more than the recommended number of standard drinks every month (27% of Tasmanians), and 35% are at a healthy weight (32% of Tasmanians).

“While Tasmania recorded healthier than Australian average performance in terms of eating fruit and drinking beyond recommended levels, 66% of Tasmanian respondents were either overweight or obese, well above the national average of 61%.”

The survey carried out across November and December 2020, highlights one in seven Australians (15%) are likely to have experienced mental illness, such as depression or anxiety over the past three months, with the number climbing to almost one in four (23%) in the ACT, and 17% in Tasmania.

According to Mr Koce, the real risk is that if we perceive ourselves to be in Good to Excellent health despite our confessed behaviours and actual experiences, many Australians won’t be on the lookout for warning signs of poor health and illness, will be less likely to seek early treatment, let alone take preventative actions.

“Combine these findings with data and warnings from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and we have a picture of a population typically not in great health but pretending it is; a population that’s not seeking medical health advice when it should or at least delaying accessing it; and all this at a particularly dangerous time of the year with extreme heat being experienced across the country,” he said.

“We’re urging Tasmanians who haven’t seen their GP in recent times to make an appointment because there’s a fair chance they’re not as healthy as they think they are.

Putting members’ health before profit

“It’s the right thing to do for the sake of ourselves and our families, and it will also ease unnecessary pressure on front line medical carers, including ambulance paramedics and public hospital Emergency Department workers, who’ve been put under incredibly testing environments over the past ten or so months with COVID.”

According to analysis by IPSOS:

“Across almost all health and mental health measures, those with private insurance fared better. Those with private cover are less likely to be overweight or obese, and more likely to have had preventative health checks.”(IPSOS, Australian Health Indicators)

The *Australian Health Indicators Survey* will be conducted annually and track the short, medium and long-term changes in self-perceptions of our health.

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Supporting commentary:

Victorian Ambulance Union Secretary, Danny Hill: “Surge in demand for ambulances in Melbourne puts paramedics under pressure” (ABC News, December 15, 2020)

"A lot of it (increased calls to Triple 000) seems to be that a lot of people haven't been going to see their GP, either they haven't been able to get in to see them, they haven't been taking patients, or due to COVID they've kept at home."

RACGP Media Release 7 January 2021, “RACGP Urges Patients to Look After Their Health”:

“A June 2020 survey of more than 700 people found 32% of respondents had delayed or avoided a visit to a GP in the three months prior, and 21% had missed a pathology test...if patients do not seek the care and treatment they need we may see a wave of health concerns emerge in coming months because patients have avoided seeing their GP. The last thing we want is patients worsening health conditions that could have been treated more effectively earlier.”

Members Health is the peak industry body for an alliance of 26 health funds that are not-for-profit or part of a member-owned group, regional or community based. They all share the common ethic of putting their members’ health before profit. Our funds represent the interests of more than 3.9 million Australians.

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