

# Work-related health problems in the EU 1998-1999

*Didier Dupré*

## Statistics in focus

### POPULATION AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

THEME 3 – 17/2001

#### WORK

## Contents

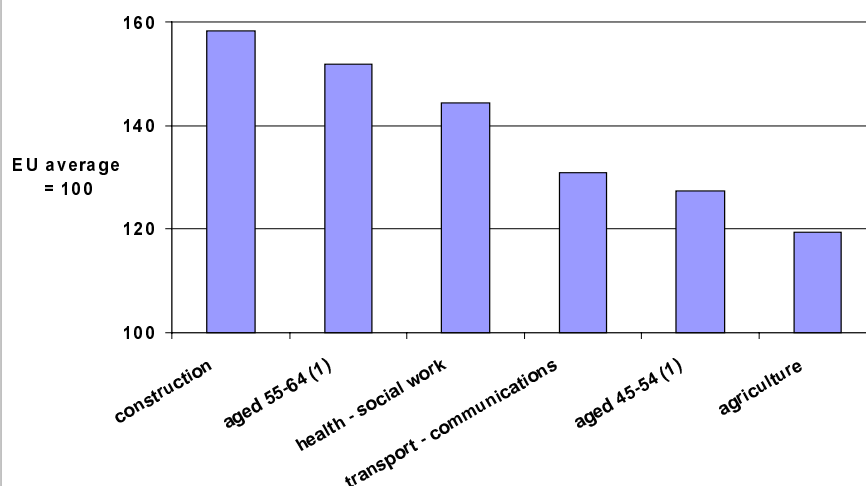
Numerous health problems due to exposure throughout working life ..... 2

The most common work-related health problem: musculoskeletal disorders ..... 3

Nervous and pulmonary disorders are also common ..... 3

On the basis of the results available for 11 Member States from the European Union Labour Force Survey (self-assessment by survey respondents of their work-related state of health), it is estimated that during the period 1998 to 1999 almost eight million people in work or having been in work in the EU were suffering from health disorders, other than accidental injuries, caused or aggravated by their current or past employment. The prevalence rate for employees is 5 372 cases per 100 000 persons per year (7 150 for 55-64 year-olds) linked to their current employment. 53% of cases involve musculoskeletal disorders, which are more frequent in the construction, transport and health and social work sectors (prevalence in these sectors is 1.2 to 1.6 times higher than average). Stress, depression or anxiety represent 18% of problems, and 26% of those involving two or more weeks' absence from work (this rate doubles in education and health and social work). Finally, pulmonary disorders affect 0.6 million people (the risk doubles in the extractive industries).

Figure 1 : Activities and ages at high risk of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (absence from work of 2 weeks or more)



Source : LFS 1999 (see page 4) - 6 economic activity and age groups studied, with the highest relative rates of prevalence of cases with 2 weeks or more of absence from work per year, compared with the EU-15 average all branches and ages = 100.  
(1) All branches.

From 1998 to 1999, an estimated 350 million working days were lost each year in the EU owing to work-related health problems, in addition to almost 150 million working days lost due to accidents at work. A total of around 500 million working days are therefore lost every year as a result of accidents at work and work-related health problems.



## Numerous health problems due to exposure throughout working life

An ad hoc module concerning health and safety at work was included in the 1999 Labour Force Survey. In particular, it provides information on health problems, excluding accidental injuries, irrespective of their severity, that survey respondents considered were caused or simply aggravated by their current or past working conditions. This is a broad concept based on self-assessment by respondents that covers more than the occupational illnesses recognised by national insurance systems. (See methodological notes)

On the basis of the results of the module, it may be estimated that from 1998 to 1999 7.7 million people throughout the EU suffered each year from one or more work-related health problems, excluding accidents, but including cases where the onset had been before and continued to cause

Table 1: Work-related health problems other than accident injuries, Europe, 1998-1999

	Work-related health problems							
	All (with or without absence from work)				With absence from work of			
	EU-11 <sup>(1)</sup> and HU Number	EU-15 (estimation) <sup>(2)</sup> Number	% of total		more than 3 days		2 weeks or more	
			All	Population group	Number	% of total	Number	% of total
<b>Total - All diagnoses and population groups</b>	6 012 672	7 711 906	100,0%		2 953 543	100,0%	2 063 482	100,0%
of which: Men	3 280 617	4 174 268	54,1%					
Women	2 732 055	3 537 638	45,9%					
Persons with more than one health problem			12,0%					
<b>Diagnoses group</b>								
Musculoskeletal disorders	3 192 147	4 094 276	53,1%		1 472 563	49,9%	1 015 146	49,2%
Stress, depression, anxiety	1 091 389	1 399 825	18,2%		669 328	22,7%	533 066	25,8%
Lung disorders	457 743	587 105	7,6%		207 211	7,0%	116 982	5,7%
Cardiovascular disorders	249 050	319 434	4,1%		101 528	3,4%	83 796	4,1%
Headaches, visual fatigue	204 631	262 462	3,4%		74 932	2,5%	33 739	1,6%
Hearing disorders	161 412	207 028	2,7%		50 257	1,7%	38 512	1,9%
Infectious diseases	152 964	196 193	2,5%		127 656	4,3%	60 270	2,9%
Skin problems	152 238	195 262	2,5%		56 183	1,9%	34 024	1,6%
Other	351 098	450 321	5,8%		193 885	6,6%	147 947	7,2%
<b>Active population<sup>(3)</sup></b>	4 323 909	5 545 884	71,9%		2 953 543	100,0%	2 063 482	100,0%
of whom: Musculoskeletal disorders	2 176 721	2 791 882	36,2%		1 472 563	49,9%	1 015 146	49,2%
Stress, depression, anxiety	949 620	1 217 991	15,8%		669 328	22,7%	533 066	25,8%
Lung disorders	288 616	370 181	4,8%		207 211	7,0%	116 982	5,7%
aged under 45	2 389 606	3 064 930	39,7%		1 608 207	54,5%	1 054 503	51,1%
aged 45-64	1 883 999	2 416 434	31,3%		1 310 543	44,4%	983 781	47,7%
aged 65 or over	50 304	64 520	0,8%		34 793	1,2%	25 198	1,2%
<b>Non-active persons having worked previously</b>	1 688 763	2 166 022	28,1%					
of whom: Musculoskeletal disorders	1 015 426	1 302 394	16,9%					
Stress, depression, anxiety	141 769	181 834	2,4%					
Lung disorders	169 127	216 924	2,8%					
aged under 45	202 682	259 962	3,4%					
aged 45-64	786 409	1 008 655	13,1%					
aged 65 or over	699 672	897 405	11,6%					

Source : ad hoc LFS module 1999; health problems suffered during all or part of the past 12 months at date of interview; persons with more than one such problem: only the most severe (in medical terms and in terms of effect on activity) is counted.  
(<sup>1</sup>) Except B, F, NL and A, no diagnosis available for D. (<sup>2</sup>) See methodological notes. (<sup>3</sup>) Absence from work in past 12 months.

problems. By way of comparison, 7.4 million people in the EU fall victim every

year to accidents at work (only new cases, irrespective of their severity). These problems mainly involve those aged 45 years and over: 4.4 million (57%). Finally, 12% of victims (similar proportion to accidents at work) had suffered from more than one work-related health problem over the year, the characteristics of only the most serious of these having been studied in the survey (between 17% and 18% of cases in which a pulmonary or cardiovascular disorder, infection or headache is the most serious problem suffered). (Table 1)

23% of cases, i.e. 1.8 million, involve people who are not working for reasons other than health problems (in particular, retired persons suffering from problems due to the nature of their employment during their working life). Among the other victims, 9% declared they were permanently inactive as a result of this health problem, representing more than 120 million working days lost every year. Added to that are 111 million days lost for cumulated absences from work of three months or more over the year (14% of cases). In total, an estimated 350 million working days are lost every year in the EU for all absences from work and periods of inactivity due to work-related health problems. (Table 3)

Table 2: Prevalence of work-related health problems - number per 100 000 persons<sup>(1)</sup> - Europe, 1998-1999

	All (with or without absence from work)	With 2 or more weeks of absence from work <sup>(2)</sup>
<b>Total - All diagnoses and population groups</b>	<b>5 372</b>	<b>1 746</b>
Musculoskeletal disorders	2 645	817
of which: Agriculture, hunting, forestry	2 895	975
Construction	3 158	1 292
Wholesale and retail trade, repairs	2 526	814
Transport and communications	3 160	1 070
Health and social work	4 283	1 179
Community, social, personal services aged 55-64	2 666	493
	3 555	1 240
Stress, depression, anxiety	1 181	445
of which: Transport and communications	975	510
Real estate, renting, business activities	1 199	408
Public administration	1 323	630
Education	2 306	828
Health and social work	2 188	832
Community, social, personal services aged 55-64	1 340	446
	1 339	528
Lung disorders	296	82
of which: Agriculture, hunting, forestry	375	75
Mining and quarrying	672	376
Manufacturing	338	101
Education	513	100
Health and social work	331	114
Community, social, personal services aged 55-64	345	63
	495	243
Other diagnoses groups	1 250	402

Source : ad hoc LFS module 1999, EU-15 and HU except B, F, NL and A (and D except total).

(<sup>1</sup>) Number of work-related health problems (over 1 year, excluding accidents) in main job per 100 000 employees (direct responses to survey).

(<sup>2</sup>) In past 12 months.

## The most common work-related health problem: musculoskeletal disorders

One single type of problem covers more than half of the victims: musculoskeletal disorders which affect 4.1 million people, i.e. 53% of cases (up to 60% of the non-active population). Their annual prevalence rate in the EU from 1998 to 1999 is 2 645 cases linked to the current main employment for 100 000 employees. It is highest in the health and social work sector (4 283) and among 55-64 year-olds (3 555). The prevalence rate for musculoskeletal disorders resulting in an absence from work of two weeks or more (cumulated over one year) is highest in the construction industry (1 292 compared to an average of 817). (Tables 1 and 2)

Table 3: Work-related health problems excluding accidents, by employment status of victim and duration of absence from work over past 12 months, EU, 1998-1999

	Work-related health problems			Number of days lost	
	All persons	Persons active or expecting never again to work through health problem (1) (2)		Total (1 000 000)	Average per work-related health problem
		% of total	% of total		
<b>Active persons (1) :</b>					
No absence from work	27	35	35	0,0	0
1-3 days lost	5	7	42	0,8	2
4 days to less than 1 week lost	5	7	49	2,1	5
1 to less than 2 weeks lost	6	8	57	4,7	10
2 weeks to less than 1 month lost	8	10	67	13,2	22
1 to less than 3 months lost	8	10	78	37,3	60
3 months or more lost	11	14	91	111,0	137
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>91</b>		<b>169,1</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Persons expecting never again to work as result of work-related health problem (2)</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>120,1</b>	<b>274</b>
<b>Total persons active or expecting never again to work</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>289,2</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Other non-active persons (2)</b>	<b>23</b>			<b>59,5</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>All victims</b>	<b>100</b>			<b>348,7</b>	<b>55</b>

Source : ad hoc module in LFS 1999. (1) Persons in work or unemployed (only those having worked).

(2) Persons inactive through a health problem related to their work in the past (days lost: excluding retired persons) or expecting to become inactive (will never do paid work again) as a result of a recent work-related health problem.

(3) The work-related health problem is not specified as the cause of inactivity; days lost are enumerated for non-retired persons considering that they would have been unable to work for 3 months or more because of this health problem (non-reported or partial reason for inactivity, factor preventing return to work, etc.) and the average numbers of days lost in this group and the total are calculated by including only these cases.

## Nervous and pulmonary disorders are also common

The next set of problems relates to stress, depression and anxiety which affect 1.4 million people, i.e. 18.2% (22.0% of cases amongst the active population) with a prevalence rate of 1 181. Education (2 306) and health and social work (2 188) are particularly

affected. The prevalence rate for absences from work of two weeks or more is also high in public administration (630 compared to an average of 445) and transport (510). Finally, pulmonary disorders represent the third most common work-related health problem:

7.6% of cases (10.0% of the non-active population). The extractive industries (prevalence rate of 672 compared to an average of 296) and 55-64 year-olds (495) are those most affected. (Tables 1 and 2)

### ➤ ESSENTIAL INFORMATION – METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

**In the 1999 European Union labour force survey (LFS, households survey on employment and the labour market), an ad hoc module concerned accidents at work and occupational illnesses.** It was defined by Commission Regulation (EC) No 1571/98 of 20 July 1998 and comprised five variables on **diseases, disabilities and other physical or psychological health problems, apart from accidental injuries, suffered by persons during the past 12 months, caused or made worse by the work** (self-assessment, including problems where the onset was one year prior to the survey and those due to earlier employment which, where appropriate, continue to affect persons currently non-active): number of health problems, with, if there is one or more, for the most serious of these, the type of problem, number of days of absence from work (past 12 months), the job which caused or aggravated the problem and the economic activity concerned. It also included six variables on **accidental injuries occurring at work** or in the course of work (see specific publication on accidents at work). The other usual information in the Labour Force Survey is defined by the relevant survey methodology.

The module was conducted by 11 Member States (the exceptions being Belgium, France and Austria; the Netherlands had to conduct it at a later date) and Hungary, as part of the survey for the second quarter of 1999 (except Sweden, which conducted it partly during the first quarter, and Italy and the United Kingdom, in the third quarter). All in all, 650 000 persons were interviewed in the survey about the suffering and, if so, about the characteristics of work-related health problems.

Germany: number and length of absences from work of health problems only. Spain: "diseases" in the strict sense. Greece: very few data available. Ireland: most recent health problems (musculoskeletal disorders: 93%). United Kingdom: persons having been in employment over the past 12 months. No age limit except in Denmark (65 years), Finland and Sweden (75 years). Estimates for EU-15 and EUR-12 have been drawn up on the basis of the data available for the Member States covered by the module.

The indicator for the frequency of work-related health problems was defined only in respect of the employees who replied directly to the survey (i.e.

excluding responses from another member of the household) and only for cases linked to their current main employment. This is the **prevalence rate** = (number of health problems suffered over the past 12 months / number of employees in the reference population) x 100 000. The **relative prevalence rate** = (prevalence rate of group studied / total prevalence rate of EU-15) x 100 was also calculated to facilitate comparisons for the main groups of diagnosis for work-related health problems and the main population groups exposed to them.

The **active population** is made up of people in employment and the unemployed during the reference week of the survey. However, for work-related health problems, only those unemployed who have already been in work are taken into account and absences from work over the past 12 months are only counted for those having been employed during the past 12 months. For non-retired persons not in employment, the days lost are counted only if their non-employment is due to the health problems or if they are potentially unable to work for three months or more per year (except Spain: no days counted in this case).

# Further information:

## ➤ Reference publications

Title European Union Labour Force Survey – Methods and definitions – 1998 Edition  
 Catalogue No CA-19-98-536-EN-C Price EUR 11,50

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New Cronos, Theme 3, Domain Health and safety, Collection Health and safety at work

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## For information on methodology

**Didier Dupré**, Eurostat/E3, L-2920 Luxembourg, Tel. (352) 4301 35034, Fax (352) 4301 35399, E-mail: didier.dupre@cec.eu.int

**Contributions : Nassima Hamzaoui**, Eurostat/E3, E-mail: nassima.hamzaoui@cec.eu.int, and **Annamaria Sarosi**, Hungarian Central Statistical Office, annamaria.sarosi@office.ksh.hu

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