

HEALTH BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN: WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION COLLABORATIVE CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY

CYPRUS NATIONAL REPORT

SUMMARY

This summary presents the main results of the World Health Organization (WHO) Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC 2021/2022) study in Cyprus. The aim of the study is to assess the health status of students aged 11, 13 and 15 years-old in relation to their health, quality of life, social environment, and health behaviours.

An online questionnaire, which included compulsory and optional topics, was administered to students of the three age groups. A school questionnaire was also administered. The data collection took place between November 1, 2021 and April 11, 2022.

In total, 287 classes, with 5249 students, a representative sample for the reference population participated in the HBSC 2021/22 survey. The questionnaire was completed by 4818 students (from 276 classes) with a response rate at 91,8%. Overall, and by age group, the participating number of boys was approximately equal to that of girls. The school questionnaire was completed by the school leadership team in 200 of the 212 selected schools with a response rate at 94,3%.

In line with the structure of the international report, the results of the national report are presented in five sections: **Social Context, Health and Quality of Life, Health Behaviors, Risky Behaviors and COVID-19.**

In relation to the SOCIAL CONTEXT,

Family culture

- Almost all students report living with their mothers (96,3%) and fewer with their fathers (82,9%). A few students report living with their stepfather (3,5%) or stepmother (1,2%).
- About 8 out of 10 students agree that their family tries to help them (87,8%) and supports them emotionally (82,8%), that they talk about their problems with their family (74,1%) or that their family is willing to help them make decisions (85,3%). Older students report less support from their families compared to younger ones.
- More than two-thirds of students (67,7%) agree that they find it *very easy* or *easy* to talk to their father about things that really bother them. This proportion is higher (>80%) in the case of the mother. Both percentages decrease as students get older.

Peer culture

- Most of the students believe that they are connected to their friends: 74,6% agree to some extent that their friends really try to help them, 73,3% that they can count on their friends when things go wrong,

80,6% that they have friends with whom they can share their joys and sorrows and 74,3% that they can talk about their problems with their friends.

School experience

- Many students indicate that they enjoy being together with their classmates (58,1%), that most of their classmates are kind and helpful (57,1%) and that their classmates accept them as they are (70%).
- The 67,4% of the sampled students report positive feelings about the support they receive from their teachers. Younger ones (11 year-olds) appear to have more positive feelings about the support they receive from their teachers compared to the older students, with 81,4% reporting (*agree* and *strongly agree*) that the teachers accept them as they are, 77,3% that they care about them as persons, and 72,1% that they have a lot of trust in their teachers.
- Students' feelings about school are positive, with 55% of them stating that they either *like it a lot* or *like it very much*. However, positive feelings decrease with age. 25,2% of the students, aged 11 years old, report that they *like school a lot*, compared to the 10,3% of the students aged 13 years old and only 7,9% of the older ones (15 years old).
- On the other hand, older students (13 and 15 years old) report feeling too much pressure by the schoolwork they have to do, compared to the younger ones (11 years old). While 27% of the 11-year-olds report feeling *quite* or *very* pressured by the schoolwork they have to do, this figure rises to 67,4% for 13-year-olds and 71,9% for 15-year-olds.

Social inequality

- More than 90% of the fathers, and more than 80% of the mothers, work. Around 42% of those whose father does not work report that he is sick, retired or a student, while 22,3% say that their father is looking for a job. Among students whose mother does not work, the majority state that she is full-time at home or takes care of others (70,2%) and 10,2% that she is looking for a job.
- In relation to the socio-economic status of the family, 76,3% of the participants come from families owning two or more cars. The majority of them reports having two or more bathrooms (77,8%) and a dishwasher (75,1%) in their house. The 58,9% of the students have more than 2 computers at home, 5 out of 6 have their own bedroom and almost 1 out of 2 travelled with their family out of Cyprus for a holiday/vacation, the year before this study took place.

Migration

- The majority of the students were born in Cyprus (86%), while a small percentage of them were born in Greece (3,6%), Russia (1,3%), Romania (1,1%), Bulgaria (1,1%), the United Kingdom (1%) and other countries. The distribution of the parents' country of birth is different, since only 72,2% of the fathers and 64% of the mothers were born in Cyprus.
- Regarding school policies for the integration of immigrant students, 92,2% of school principals state that they implement measures to encourage multiculturalism and knowledge about different cultures, as well as to actively encourage integration between immigrant and non-immigrant children (87,2%). Policies/practices to encourage involvement of immigrant parents in their child's schooling are implemented in 58,6% of schools.

Electronic media communication

- Students of all ages report that they communicate online frequently (*daily, almost all the time, all day*) with close friends (33,5%), with friends from a larger friend group (14,7%), with other people than friends (parents, brothers/sisters, classmates and teachers) (19,3%) or with friends that they got to know through the internet but didn't know before (8%). While 76,6% say that they communicate, at least daily online, with close friends, this figure drops to 54,4% with friends from a larger friend group, 53,1% with other people than friends (parents, brothers/sisters, classmates and teachers) and 22,3% with friends that they got to know through the internet but didn't know before.
- About half of the students of all age groups disagree (*disagree* and *strongly disagree*) that they can talk about their inner feelings on the internet more easily (49,6%), compared to a face-to-face encounter.
- A large percentage of students used social media during the past year to escape from negative feelings (boys: 44,3%, girls: 57,3%), while a smaller percentage could not think of anything else except the moment they would connect to social media again (boys: 23,7%, girls: 31%). In addition, 31,1% of the participants felt bad when they could not use the social media while 36,1% tried to spend less time on social media but failed. More than one out of four students regularly felt dissatisfied because they wanted to spend more time on social media (28,6%), had serious conflict with their parents, brothers or sisters because of their social media use (24,4%) and 22,3% regularly neglected other activities (e.g. hobbies, sport) because they wanted to use social media.
- Almost one third of the students (31,6%) play games almost every day, with the largest percentage (56,2%) spending 1-2 hours a day and 17,8% more than 4 hours a day.
- The 90% of the school principals stated that they have policies/regulations about netiquette-internet etiquette- (51,8% written and 38,1% verbal). In terms of safe social media use, half of the schools (50,2%) have written regulations/policies in place, 37,9% have informal policies, and 11,9% have no policies on the use of social networks.

In relation to **HEALTH OUTCOMES**,

Body image

- More than half of students (55,2%) report that they are *about the right size*. A higher percentage (24,6%) of 13-year-olds think that their body is a bit too fat compared to the younger students (11-year-olds: 20,5%, 15-year-olds: 23,5%). The 11-year-olds tend to think of their body as much or a bit too thin in a higher percentage (24,6%) compared to the older students (13-year-olds: 19,7%, 15-year-olds: 21,7%). The boys tend to think of themselves as much or a bit too thin in a higher percentage (24,2%) compared to girls (19,3%).

Body Mass Index (BMI)

- The average body weight of students is 42,7 kg (11-year-olds), 53,8 kg (13-year-olds) and 61,8 kg (15-year-olds), while their average height is 151,5 cm (11-year-olds), 163,3 cm (13-year-olds) and 169,1 cm (15-year-olds).

- The average Body Mass Index (BMI) of both boys (20,5) and girls (19,6) falls within the expected values.

Injuries

- More than one out of two students (52,6%) report being injured and treated by a doctor or a nurse at least once in the past 12 months (prior the study).

Mental health and well-being

- More than 90% of the participants describe their health as *excellent* (46,8%) or *good* (43,3%).
- On a scale of 1 to 10, school -aged students tend to be generally satisfied with their lives with an average score of 8. Elementary students (11-year-olds) show higher levels of satisfaction (8,4), compared to the older ones (13-year-olds: 8.0, 15-year-olds: 7,5).
- Small percentages of students report daily headaches (6,9%), stomachaches (3,8%) or backaches (8,4%). A higher percentage of students report experiencing feeling low (12,8%), irritability or bad temper (21,1%) and feeling nervous (22,6%) about every day. Interestingly, older students tend to complain more than the younger ones. This could be an indication of increasing feelings of nervousness and stress levels with age. Lower numbers of students report difficulty in getting to sleep (12,5%) and feeling dizzy (5,6%) about every day.
- Many students report cheerful and in good spirits (>75%), feeling calm and relaxed (>65%), and feeling fresh and rested (>50%).
- Almost 60% of the students agree that they have not felt lonely in the last 12 months. Around 1 out of 4 students (24%) *sometimes* feel lonely, with the difference between boys and girls being statistically significant (19,6% and 28,5%, respectively).
- The 64,9% of students state that if they try hard enough, they *often* or *always* find a solution to a problem and that they manage to do the things that they decide to do (60,3%).
- About half of the students feel they can control the important things in their lives (54,6%), feel confident about their ability to handle their personal problems (47,7%) and do not feel that the difficulties are piling up so high that they cannot overcome them (56,7%). About 1 in 3 students say they feel that things are going their way (36,9%).
- About 1 out of 4 students report that they have often (*more than half of the days* or *almost every day*) been bothered by feeling nervous, anxious or on the edge (28,8%), that they were not able to stop or control worrying (22,5%), that they worried too much about different things (28%), that they had trouble relaxing (24,3%), that they felt being so restless that it was hard to sit still (24,7%), that they were easily annoyed or irritable (24,8%) and that they felt afraid as if something awful might happen (23,9%).
- Regarding how students perceive their future, almost half of them (47,7%) reported that in the future they will be involved in helping other people, 69,2% that they will have friends they can count on and the 80% that in the future they will be healthy and safe.

In relation to **HEALTH BEHAVIOURS**,

Eating habits

- Around one in four 11- and 13-years-olds (25,9% and 28,4%, respectively), and one in three 15-year-olds (32,5%) *never* eat breakfast on weekdays. The corresponding percentages for the weekends are lower (11-year-olds: 5,6%, 13-year-olds: 7,4%, 15-year-olds: 10,6%).
- About half of the students tend to eat fruits (56,1%) and vegetables (56,5%) 5-6 times a week or more (*once a day or more than once a day*). The corresponding percentage for eating sweets is much lower (36,4%). The consumption of soft drinks is also less frequent (21,5% *never* and 25,6% *less than once a week*). Only 19% of the participants report consuming soft drinks at least 5-6 days a week or more often (e.g. on a daily basis).
- In terms of how often they eat with their family, half of the students (53%) tend to have a meal with their family *every day*.
- Some schools report that they have policies/regulations on health food habits, either in written (36,8%) or verbally (49,1%), while about 1 out of 6 school principals claim that they have not adopted such measures. The current policies in place relate to: a) increasing the consumption of healthy foods (fruits and vegetables, whole grains, milk, yoghurt, smoothie) and b) limiting the consumption of junk food - sweets, chips, and soft drinks- (76,8% and 73,6% respectively). Regarding the inclusion of fruit and/or vegetables at all or most school events, while 58,4% of the schools have responded positively, 41,6% of schools do not have a policy in place. Finally, 86,8% of the schools provide breakfast, 24,6% lunch/hot lunch, 47,2% fruits and 23% vegetables or salads.

Toothbrushing

- Just over half of the students (59%) brush their teeth *more than once a day*.

Physical activity, sedentary behaviour and screen-time related sitting

- Students spend an average of 4 days (11- and 13-year-olds) and 3,5 days (15-year-olds) per week on physical activity. However, the deviations from the average, are large.
- More than half of the students (64,8%) exercise physically so much that they get out of breath or sweat at least 3 times a week. The frequency of exercise decreases with age, with more 11-year-olds physically exercising so much that they get out of breath or sweat at least 3 times a week (68,8%), compared to the older ones (13-year-olds: 66,9%, 15-year-olds: 58,4%).
- Regarding sedentary-behaviour levels, 32,4% of students state that they sit for a short time, while 34,9% sit for a long time. The 14,6% sit for a long time while almost 1 out of 10 students (9,4%) sit almost all the time. A higher proportion (28,6%) of older students say they sit for a long time or almost all the time, compared to the younger ones.
- Students spend around 2 hours or more, per day, playing games on a computer, games console, tablet, smartphone or TV (53,5%) or using a computer and other electronic devices to access social networks (49,4%). Around 4 out of 10 students (39,9%) spend the same amount of time (around 2 hours or more,

per day) watching TV, DVDs or videos, including online videos on sites such as YouTube etc., while almost 1 out of 5 students (17%) look for information on the internet or browse the internet.

- 86% of school principals report that they have policies/regulations that explicitly refer to physical activity: 68,5% of schools organise extracurricular physical activities during breaks/lunch time; 53,9% organise extracurricular physical activities before/after school; 37,2% implement physical activity in the lessons (active lessons, in-class activity breaks); 71,2% provide/maintain physical activity opportunities in the outdoor environment (facilities and equipment); and 36,5% support or promote students' walking or biking (or other modes of physically active travel) to and from school.

In relation to the section about RISK BEHAVIOURS,

Alcohol use

- When it comes to alcohol use, the students appear willing to try it. On average, about one out of two students (46,4%) report having consumed alcohol at least once in their lives. Older students report more frequent alcohol consumption. Around half of 15-year-old students (47%) had consumed alcohol more than once in the last 30 days before the survey was conducted.
- On average, 28,9% of 15-year-olds and 11,5% of 13-year-olds, compared to 4,7% of 11-year-olds, report having been drunk at least once in their life. This figure decreases to 11% (15-year-olds), 4,5% (13-year-olds) and 2% (11-year-olds) in the last 30 days prior the survey was conducted.

Tobacco and e-cigarette use

- Almost all 11-year-olds (97,5%) and 13-year-olds (94,5%) report that they have never smoked. This figure decreased to 82,8% for 15-year-olds. At the same time, more than 1% of 13-year-olds and 5% of 15-year-olds present themselves as regular smokers (reported smoking *20-29 days* and *30 or more days* in the last 30 days prior the survey).
- Almost all 11-year-olds (95,2%) report that they have never used an e-cigarette. However, this figure fell to 83,8% for 13-year-olds and 61,8% for 15-year-olds, which is considered worrying particularly for 15-year-olds, since 38,1% say they have used an e-cigarette at least once in their lifetime. At the same time, 2,8% of 13-year-olds and 7,7% of 15-year-olds state that they are frequent e-cigarette users (reported using an e-cigarette *20-29 days* and *30 days or more* in the last 30 days prior the survey).
- Most schools have adopted policies/regulations, either formal (74,8%) or informal (17,9%) on smoking. 95% of schools report having policies/regulations to prohibit smoking by students in the school and on school grounds. Almost the same percentage of schools (94,1%) have a similar no-smoking policy for teachers (prohibit smoking by teachers in the school and on school grounds).

Use of waterpipe

- The results on the use of waterpipe are worrying, as one out of three 15-year-olds and 12,4% of the 13-year-olds report having used waterpipe at some point in their lives, while around 17% of 15-year-olds say they have used waterpipe at least once in the last 30 days before the survey.

Cannabis use

- 7,1% of 15-year-olds have used cannabis (marijuana, hashish) at some point in their lives, while almost 2,7% report having used cannabis daily, in the last 30 days prior to the implementation of the survey.

Bullying and cyberbullying

- On average, 4,3% of students report bullying another person at school at least twice a month *in the last 2 months* before the survey was conducted. More students (7,8%) report being bullied at school.
- Some students (9,5%) state that they have been involved in cyberbullying at least once *in the last 2 months* before the survey was conducted. More students (14,4%) claim that they have been subjected to cyberbullying at least once *in the last 2 months* before the survey was conducted. Higher percentages of 13-year-olds (compared to the 11- and 15 year-olds) report this type of action.
- Almost all schools state that they have policies/regulations against bullying and violence, either written (83,1%) or verbal (15,5%) as follows: prevention of violence and bullying, discrimination and harassment (98,6%); regular discussions about violence and bullying, discrimination and harassment in lessons (92,2%); understanding cyber- or electronic bullying (87,2%); and understanding the role of bystanders (89,5%).

Fighting

- Slightly more than 1 out of 3 students (34,9%), report having been involved in a physical fight at least once in the last year before the survey.

Sexual health

- More than one out of six 15-year-olds (15%) report having sexual intercourse, with the majority being boys (24,1%).
- Regarding the age of the first sexual intercourse, many boys (28,1%) and girls (58,1%), who report having had sexual intercourse, say it happened at the age of 14 and 15, respectively.
- 61% of the students who have responded that they have had sexual intercourse, also state that they used a condom either themselves or their partner, during their last sexual intercourse, while the 18,6% used a birth control pill.
- While 81% of the school principals state that they have policies/regulations that explicitly mention sexual education (46,8% written and 34,2% verbal), almost 1 out of every 5 schools (19%) state that they do not have a policy in place.

Finally, regarding the data collected about **COVID-19**,

- 1 out of 5 students (19,3%) of all three age groups report being tested positive, for COVID-19, with the highest positivity rates recorded in older students.
- Half of the students (51,3%) report that someone in their close family ((i.e. parent, sibling or grandparent) was tested positive, for COVID-19.

- With increasing age, the percentage of students reporting that there has been a negative impact on areas such as their mental health, their school performance and what they ate or drank, because of the pandemic, is higher.
- The most common protective measures used by students were the use of hand sanitiser (74,8%), the use of a face mask (74,2%) and regular hand washing (74,1%).
- Family members (44,1%) and social media (34%) were the most frequent sources of information about the pandemic.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic: a) 51,2% of schools reported an increase in mental health problems (e.g. anxiety, low mood); b) 48% that feelings of loneliness and social isolation increased; c) 49,1% that feelings of motivation and engagement with school decreased; d) 53,9% that students struggled with schoolwork, e) 34,4% that there was disruption to normal sleep patterns; f) 59,5% that there were reduced opportunities for sport and physical activity; and g) 61,5% that there were increased financial concerns within the students' families.

The above-mentioned results will be discussed with policy makers, as they indicate important priorities/decisions for future policies. Some findings - for example, e-cigarette, cannabis and waterpipe use as well as, addiction to electronic media communication, sedentary behaviours, mental-health issues, and sexual health - emerge as areas of concern in relation to the school-aged children's health education. Additionally, the comparative results, both internationally and at national level, will enable policy makers to further reshape, adapt and design relevant policies.