How well are sailors taking care of themselves—
Are they living healthy?

Results from Navy respondents to the HRBS

The Health Related Behaviors Survey (HRBS) is the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)’s flagship survey for understanding the health, health-related behaviors, and well-being of active-duty service members.

- It allows leadership to better understand the readiness of the force.
- It is used to facilitate benchmarking in combination with Healthy People benchmarks (designed for the general U.S. population).
- Results are weighted to represent the 2015 active-duty force by service branch, pay grade, and gender.

Comparison to U.S. General Population

The 2015 HRBS shows that active-duty sailors generally have better health and health-related behaviors than the U.S. adult population. In particular, the proportion of sailors who are of normal weight exceeds Healthy People 2020 goals. Sailors also exceed Healthy People 2020 goals for physical activity. Their rates of use for illicit drugs and misuse for prescription drugs are also below those of the general adult population.

At the same time, less than one-third of sailors get at least seven hours of sleep nightly, below the Healthy People 2020 goal that more than two in three adults get such sleep. Sailors are also more likely than other U.S. adults to engage in binge drinking.

Development of military-appropriate population benchmarks, especially by service branch, may facilitate goal-setting, command visibility, and incremental improvements in health-related readiness.

Limitations

A low overall response rate (8.7% for the Navy and 8.8% across all services) suggests that the results should be interpreted with caution and in conjunction with other existing data. New ways to improve survey response rates are needed, including focusing survey content on shifting to a confidential rather than anonymous survey, and addressing information technology issues related to use of a non-DoD email address.

The above comparisons to the general adult population do not control for differences in demographic composition.

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Weight and sleep issues

- 32.8% were moderately or severely bothered by sleep-related lack of energy
- 6.0% took sleep medications daily or almost daily
- 64.6% were overweight or obese according to body mass index
- 57.5% were less sleep than needed

Mental and Emotional Health

- 10.1% met survey criteria for probable depression
- 16.4% met survey criteria for probable generalized anxiety disorder
- 9.7% met survey criteria for probable posttraumatic stress disorder
- 7.6% thought about attempting suicide in the past year
- 1.6% reported a suicide attempt in the past year
- 30.3% reported a self-perceived need for mental health services in the past year
- 18.4% reported that someone else told them they needed mental health treatment in the past year
- 24.3% reported mental health service use in the past year
- 35.2% said that seeking military mental health treatment damages one’s military career

Physical Health and Functional Limitations

- 36.9% reported diagnosis of at least one of nine chronic medical conditions (e.g., high blood pressure) in their lifetime
- 31.4% reported that pain bothered them a lot over the past 30 days
- 43.3% reported a functional impairment in at least one domain—work or school, social life, or family life

Sexual Behavior and Lifetime

- 22.1% had more than one sex partner in the past year
- 38.3% had sex with a new partner without a condom in the past year
- 2.1% reported contracting a sexually transmitted infection in the past year
- 24.2% were at high risk for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- 19.6% of those not expecting or trying to conceive a child had vaginal sex without using birth control in the past year
- 2.9% reported having or causing an unintended pregnancy in the past year

Sexual Orientation, Transgender Identity, and Health

- 9.1% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)

Deployment Experiences and Health

- 66.8% reported at least one prior combat or noncombat deployment

Substance Use

Alcohol, Tobacco, Illicit Drugs, and Prescription Drugs

- 34.2% binge drank in the past month (5+ drinks for men or 4+ for women in one sitting)
- 6.0% were heavy drinkers (5+ drinks 5 or more times in the past month)
- 67.9% viewed military culture as supportive of drinking
- 13.5% were current cigarette smokers
- 11.0% were current smokeless tobacco users
- 14.5% reported using e-cigarettes in the past month
- 0.9% reported illicit drug use (mostly marijuana or synthetic cannabis) in the past year
- 3.8% used prescription drugs without a valid prescription (i.e., prescription drug misuse) in the past year
- 0.6% used more of a drug than prescribed (i.e., prescription drug overuse) in the past year

Among those who had ever deployed:

- 45.6% reported exposure to combat trauma
- 17.2% reported a deployment-related injury
- 6.9% screened positive for deployment-related mild traumatic brain injury
- 3.4% reported deployment-related postconcussive symptoms
- 72.9% reported substance use, mostly alcohol or cigarettes, during their most recent deployment

Adapted from 2015 Department of Defense Health Related Behaviors Survey (HRBS) of Active-Duty Service Members: Final Report. By Sarah D. Meadows, Charles C. Engel, Rebecca L. Collins, Robin Meeks, Matthew Cohle, Jennifer Rosen-Daigl, Molly Doyle, April M. Korn, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, Gyan Ramchand, and Kayla M. Williams, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1695-OSD, 2018. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. For the complete report detailing these and other findings, visit www.rand.org/t/RR1695. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or in any other form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.html.

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