

HEALTH RISKS AT WORK

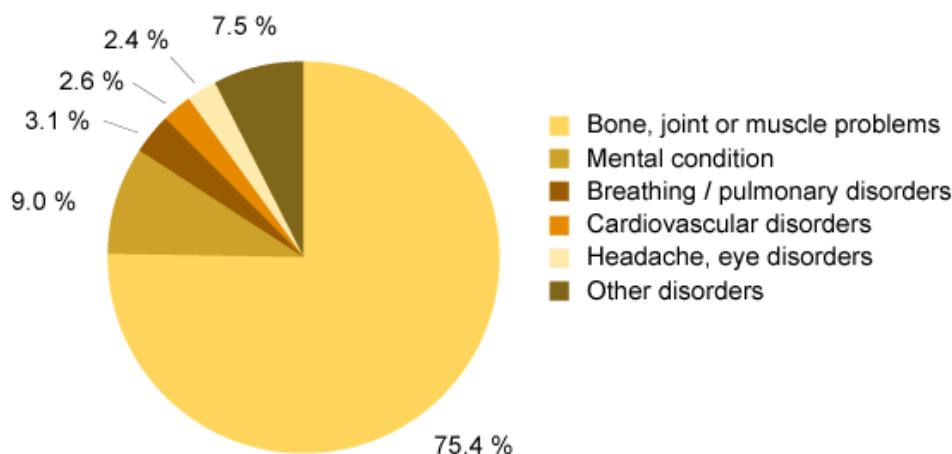
Destatis, 1 September 2009

In 2007, about 2.4 million persons in employment in Germany (6.3%) suffered from work-related health problems, according to information provided by them. This is shown by an additional survey of the labour force survey, which is harmonised at EU level; in that additional survey, some 80,000 persons (about 0.1% of the population) were asked questions on health problems at work. What was relevant here is the respondents' self-assessment rather than a medical diagnosis. The societal importance of health problems at work caused by employment has recently become obvious through the labour dispute regarding staff in nursery schools and other day homes for children.

Disorders of the musculoskeletal system ranking first

Persons in employment suffered especially from disorders of the musculoskeletal system. 984,000 persons in employment (2.6%) indicated "back conditions", "conditions of the neck, shoulders, arms and hands" (1.6%) and "problems of hips, legs or feet" (0.6%). That was followed by "mental conditions such as stress, anxiety" (0.6%) as a problem indicated as the most serious strain. Other forms of work-related health problems such as "breathing disorders and pulmonary diseases", "cardiovascular problems" or "headache and eye disorders" were mentioned by just 0.2% of persons in employment each.

Work-related health problems of persons in employment, 2007



Results of the labour force survey 2007.
Share in all persons in employment with work-related health problems.

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Who suffers from work-related health problems?

Older people have much more often work-related health problems than younger persons. Among those aged over 50 years, about every eleventh (8.8%) was affected. As was expected, younger persons in employment suffered less often: In the age group between 35 and 49 years, the share was 6.6% and among the persons in employment aged under 35 years it was 3.6%.

The sex is of minor importance in the context of work-related health problems: According to the survey results, women and men were affected roughly to the same extent by bone, joint or muscle problems (4.7% and 4.8%, respectively). In the information given on the other health problems, too, there are only slight differences between male and female persons in employment.

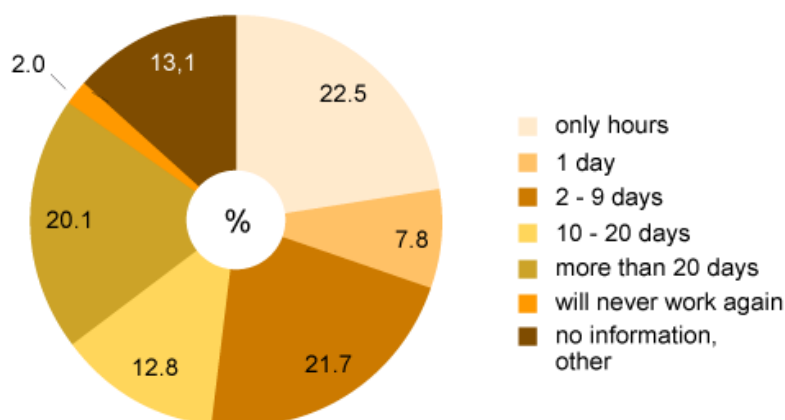
Contrary to that, the type of job performed does have an impact on the health status. Persons working in "agriculture and fishery" suffered most often (10.8%) from disorders of the musculoskeletal system. "Machine operators", too, were relatively much affected (7.4%). The shares of scientists (2.9%) and managers (3.3%) are far below the average of all persons in employment (4.7%), although they, too, mentioned that type of disorder as the main reason for work-related health problems.

Ability to work is impaired

Work-related health problems also affect the ability to work. When added up, more than half (56.6%) of the persons in employment were absent for 2 or more working days due to work-related health problems. 21.7% had to interrupt their work for 2 to 9 days. Another third (about 33.0%) of them were absent for 10 days or more due to such problems. For as many as 2.0% of the persons in employment the health disorders were so serious that they indicated that they would probably not be able any more to return to work.

For nearly one quarter (22.5%) of the persons concerned the disorders did not have any serious consequences: They returned to their work on the following day at the latest. 7.8% indicated an interruption of work of one day.

Persons in employment with work-related health problems by length of incapacity for work, 2007



Results of the labour force survey 2007.

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"Stress, mobbing and Co." – mental strain factors at work

Irrespective of acute problems, work can be perceived as a strain on health. Therefore, it was examined as part of the 2007 labour force survey whether employment is a strain with negative effects on well-being – both in physical and mental terms.

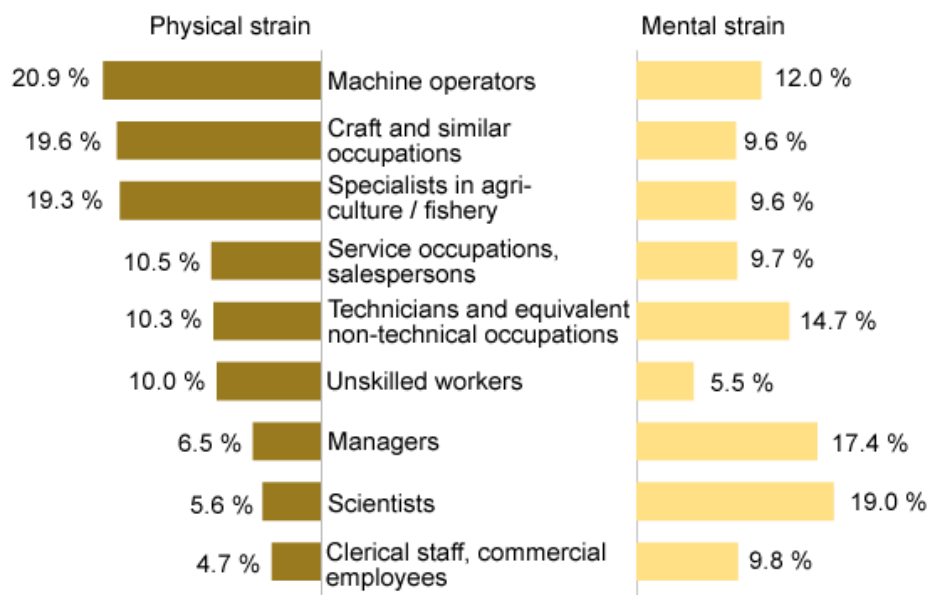
Mental strain plays a more important role in everyday work than physical strain. Every eighth person in employment (12.3%) indicated to be subject to mental strain at work which has a negative impact on well-being and, consequently, on the ability to work. The main factors here are time and work pressure. 11.2% of the persons in employment indicated those to be the main reasons for being under strain. Specific person-related reasons such as mobbing or harassment (0.8%) or even violence or threat of violence (0.3%) are mentioned much more seldom.

Altogether, there are only small differences between the sexes as regards the mental consequences. Women were slightly more often victims of mobbing (0.9% compared with 0.7% of men), but they were slightly less often subject to work and time pressure (10.1% compared with 12.2%).

As is the case for the above work-related health problems, mental strain grows along with age.

The various occupational groups are affected to different extents by mental strain: Scientists, who account for about 14.4% of all persons in employment, were most often subject to time and work pressure. 17.6% of them indicated such problems. Managers – 5.5% of the persons in employment – indicated time and work pressure in 16.9% of all cases. In the other occupational groups, about every ninth person (10.8%) suffered from mental strain at work.

Persons in employment by occupational groups who were subject to physical or mental strain, 2007



Results of the labour force survey 2007.
Share in all persons in employment of the relevant occupational group.

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Having to work hard – physical strain factors at work

About every ninth person in employment (11.0%) felt physical strain at work in 2007. The most frequent strain factors mentioned were "difficult body postures or handling heavy loads" (6.1%), followed by "noise or vibrations" (2.3%) and "dust, smoke, chemicals, vapours or gases" (2.1%). 0.5% of the persons in employment were subject to "risks of accident".

Men perceive physical strain more often than women. 13.0% of the men, but just 8.7% of the women indicated to have been under physical strain.

Similar to work-related health problems, physical strain, too, increases along with age: The age group from 55 to 59 years was particularly affected (13.4%). Those aged under 25, however, were much less often under physical strain at work (7.0% of the persons in employment in that age group).

As could be expected, persons in employment doing manual work among the various occupational groups are particularly affected by physical strain: For approximately every fifth machine operator (20.9%), craftsman (19.6%) and person working in agriculture or fishery (19.3%), physical strain at work had a negative impact on health. Persons doing clerical work have a clear advantage in this respect: Only every twentieth (4.7%) of office workers and commercial employees indicated such strain.

Accidents at work

Accidents at work, too, impair the health of persons in employment and can lead to long absence from work: About 909,000 persons (2.4%) indicated to have had one (847,000) or several (62,000) accidents at work during the last 12 months preceding the survey. It was not relevant here whether the accidents recorded were reported to an occupational accident insurance institution or a similar institution; what was relevant is the information given by the respondents in the interviews. Accidents that occurred on the way from or to the place of work were not included.

Men were twice as often affected by accidents at work as women.

Accidents at work occur more often at a younger age: At the age of under 45 years, the share was 2.7% of the persons in employment, while at the age of 45 years or over, it was 1.8%.

The risk of having an accident at work strongly depends on the job performed. The risk is highest for jobs like "cultivating, extracting and producing", which are typical of industry, agriculture and mining: 5.3% of the persons in employment who mainly performed jobs like that had an accident at work. There was also a relatively high risk for jobs like "protecting, guarding or military tasks" (5.1%), operating machines (4.1%) or driving vehicles (2.9%). Work is least dangerous in the areas of "office, computer, research", where the accident rate was just one percent.

Not every accident at work will inevitably lead to long absence from work. Every fourth person who had an accident at work indicated to have resumed work already on the subsequent day. More than every second person (60%) was back at work after two weeks. However, every seventh person in employment who had an accident at work (15%) was absent from work for more than a month as a consequence of the accident.

Conclusion

The large majority of persons in employment in Germany do not consider their employment as a strain on health. Nevertheless, slightly more than every tenth person in employment feels under physical or mental strain at work. The most important strain factors were time and work pressure. However, the strain did not always lead to acute health problems. On top of the list of health problems are disorders of the back and the musculoskeletal system. Accidents at work occur much more seldom.

Work-related health problems are relatively more frequently indicated by older employees – although they strongly depend on the occupation and job performed.