

Time: A social determinant of health

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A timely message

Everyday, people make choices about how they use their time. The VicHealth Indicators Survey found that many Victorians struggle with work and time pressures, which are often exacerbated by long commutes. Lack of time impacts sleep, sharing family meals and spending time with family and friends.



About the VicHealth Indicators Survey

- The Survey focused on the social determinants of health and complements other health survey work in Victoria such as the Victorian Population Health Survey.
- Data was collected through telephone interviews. The survey was conducted between May and August 2011 in each of Victoria's 79 Local Government Areas (LGAs), and a sample of 25,075 participants aged over 18 years was achieved.
- The weight applied to the VicHealth Indicators Survey included a pre-weight which reflects the respondent's chance of selection within the household and a population weight based on age and gender within LGA*. Analysis was performed using chi-square tests in Stata v11, with p<0.05 considered statistically significant. Only significant associations are reported here.

Stretched to breaking point?

"My husband works full time for a multinational company; I work two jobs, roughly 60 to 80 hours a week. We have three young children and the logistics are insurmountable. We don't have a cleaner. We have no family to help with the load...The complexity of the work/life balancing act is a huge issue to tackle" (Sunday Life magazine, July 2012)



Many people experience the modern malady of 'time-sickness'¹ where they lack the time or energy to incorporate health and wellbeing into their lives. The main impact on health is not necessarily a literal lack of time, but what time scarcity prevents people from doing².

What do we know?

- The demands of work hours are key drivers of time pressure, particularly for those with caring responsibilities³. The lack of time means that people have less time for shopping, cooking, exercise and sleeping.
- On-the-go eating and snacking has become increasingly popular⁴. Food and drink manufacturers have tapped into the temporal and spatial deficits in our community and have developed products that are quick, easy and convenient to prepare, but these foods are often processed, pre-packaged, and high in salt, fat and sugar.
- Car dependency and urban growth mean that more than nine million Australians commute on a daily basis⁵. Around 10 per cent of workers spend ten or more hours commuting each week⁶.
- As a society we have become more obese, less active, more harried and less socially connected⁴.

How is time linked to health and wellbeing?

Chronic diseases are the leading killers in affluent Western nations. The behaviours known to prevent them (including physical activity and eating healthy fresh food) require time. Time is a finite resource and should be seen as a social determinant of health influenced by a person's life stage, employment status, geographic location, caring responsibilities and employment.

The implications of time pressure are profound:

- wellbeing is compromised by the stress of being harried
- social capital (or community) declines as people no longer have the time to participate in collective or public activities
- families and friendships may be fractured as people have no time to spend with those they care about most⁷.

Survey Results

Time pressure

Survey participants were more likely to report feeling rushed and pressed for time if they were female, had a university education, a higher household income (more than \$60,000 per year), lived in the inner city, and had children (p<0.05).

Other social determinants explored in the survey included:

- long commute (≥2 hours per day)
- lack of time for friends/family
- inadequate sleep (<7 hours per week day)
- sharing a meal with family (≥ 5 days each week).

Inadequate sleep

Although individual sleep needs vary, most adults require between seven and nine hours each night. Insufficient sleep has been linked to the development of a number chronic diseases and conditions including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity and depression⁸. The results indicate that there is an association between time use and sleep:

- Those reporting a lack of time for friends and family were more likely to report sleeping for less than 7 hours than those who reported adequate time for family and friends (40.1% vs 28.2%, p<0.001).
- Those experiencing time pressure were more likely to report sleeping for less than seven hours than those not under time pressure (37.4% vs 27.3%, p<0.001).
- Those reporting sleeping less than seven hours were less likely to report very good or excellent health than those sleeping seven hours or more (46.0 % vs 54.7%, p<0.001)

Commute times

Commute times have a significant impact upon people's time and wellbeing. People who commuted two hours or more per day (relative to those with shorter commutes) were more likely to:

- agree they lacked time for friends and family (51.9% vs 29.7%, p<0.001)
- agree they were under time pressure (57.7% vs 47.3%, p<0.001)
- report sleeping for less than 7 hours (37.7 vs 29.6%, p<0.001).

Sharing a meal with family

- Evidence suggests that when families share a meal together they consume food that is more nutritious than those who eat alone, with meals tending to include more fruits and vegetables, and less fried food and sugar-sweetened beverages⁹.
- The family plays an important role in shaping children's eating and physical activity patterns. Sharing a family meal has been associated with having a healthy body weight and the consumption of healthy foods¹⁰.
- Sharing meals together is a special time for families and friends to connect and share the day's or week's events¹¹.
 - Those reporting they lacked time for friends and family were less likely to share a meal five or more days per week than those with adequate time (61.7% vs. 68.1%, p<0.001).
 - Those experiencing time pressure were less likely to share a meal five or more days per week than those not feeling rushed or pressed for time (64.9% vs. 67.4%, p<0.05).



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* Based on Estimated Residential Population data published by the ABS (catalogue 3235.0, 30 June 2010).

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