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Title:

Health status of Australian children

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Abstract:

Using a set of indicators mapped to the National Child Health Information Framework, health status and risk and protective factors influencing health were examined in children aged 0–14 years by age, sex, Indigenous status and area of residence (metropolitan, rural and remote areas). In general, the overall survival of children has improved over the last decade. There was a 26% decline in the infant mortality rate (IMR) between 1991 and 2000 from 7.0 to 5.2 per 1,000. Most of the decline in IMR was due to decreases in mortality from sudden infant death syndrome (which declined by 62%), congenital malformations (28% decline) and conditions originating in the perinatal period (foetal and neonatal periods, a 19% decline). The reduction in infant mortality was also paralleled by reductions in mortality among children aged 1–14 years—the rate declined from 22.4 in 1991 to 17.6 in 2000, a decrease of 21%. The reduction was mainly due to reduced mortality from injuries, especially motor vehicle accidents and accidental drowning. A dramatic decline was also observed over the last decade in the incidence of vaccine preventable diseases, which was in line with improved vaccination coverage. While the mortality data show better survival of children over the last decade, the burden of chronic diseases and disability in children remains high. The prevalence and hospitalisation rates of asthma, Type 1 diabetes and mental health problems are high and continue to rise.

A number of factors that can influence health were also examined. The proportions of children with biological and behavioural risk factors that impact adversely on health are on the rise. For example, the rate of overweight and obesity in children is around 20%, and the rate of sun protection, while high during infancy, declines with age. Moreover the proportions of children aged 12–15 years who had recently smoked or drunk alcohol were 13% and 24%, respectively, while the proportion of children aged 14 years who had used an illicit drug in the last year was nearly 16%.

On most health measures examined, the health status of Indigenous children was worse than other Australian children, particularly for diseases such as rheumatic fever, invasive pneumococcal diseases and hepatitis A. Similarly, children living in rural and remote areas had worse health outcomes than those living in metropolitan areas.