

Sex Differences in Predictors of Health Decline:
Results from a 16-Year Longitudinal Cohort Study

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Abstract

This study uses longitudinal data to examine predictors of health decline in a large sample cohort of Canadian men and women over a 16-year period. The results show the effect of age on health decline was more pronounced for men than women. Men who were never married were also more likely to report a deterioration in health compared to married men; no such difference was observed among women. However, being divorced, separated or widowed had a similar negative effect for women. Race and education were significantly related to health decline for both sexes, although the effects were stronger for women than men. On the other hand, urban/rural residence was linked to change in health status for men but not for women. Interestingly, females who consumed alcohol on either a regular or occasional basis had a lower risk of becoming unhealthy compared with females who were lifetime abstainers; similar effects were less pronounced for males. The effects of smoking and body mass index on health decline were stronger for men, while the effect of exercise was stronger for women. Men and women with work-related stress were equally likely to report a shift toward poor health, while personal-related stress had a stronger association for men and distress for women. Overall, the results show that factors associated with change in health status over the life course differ by sex. Policies and programs promoting optimal health and well-being should consider how health risks and outcomes confront men and women in different ways as they age.