

Overview of Mental Health in Northern Ireland

Proportion of the population with mental ill-health (rates)

Annual health surveys within each region use the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) to monitor the prevalence of probable mental ill-health among the population. Based on 2024 (GHQ-12) figures, around a fifth (19%) of the NI population have probable mental ill-health (GHQ score of 4 or more). The most recent year that GHQ-12 figures for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (NI) were published, allowing for comparison, was in 2022. The rate of mental ill-health in NI in 2022 was higher than in England in 2022 (21% compared with 19%) but lower than Scotland (27%). It should be noted that England and NI report figures based on fiscal years, while Scotland measure in calendar years. The rate in NI was 27% in the 2021-22 fiscal year, 21% in the 2022-2023 fiscal year while Scotland reported 27% in 2022, and 21% in 2023. Both capturing a similar increase in poor mental health, and then a return to pre-pandemic levels. Scotland have yet to publish figures for 2024 to allow for further comparison.

Disability associated with mental ill-health (impact and severity)

Although helpful, GHQ-12 is a crude measure of mental ill-health. It cannot capture the severity and complexity of need within each region. We can gain insight into this through The Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study which provides a comprehensive picture of mortality and disability related to various conditions, across countries, time, age, and sex. The burden of disease is calculated using the disability-adjusted life year (DALY). The DALY figures represent the sum of the number of years of potential life lost due to premature death, and the years of productive life lost to due to disability, compared to a standardised life expectancy. GBD also reports on Years Lived with a Disability (YLD), one YLD represents the equivalent of one full year of healthy life lost due to disability or ill-health.

Mental disorders rank as the 3rd highest cause of disease and disability in NI. Mental disorder accounts for 2,941.56 years of full health lost in 100,000, and 9.64% of the total disease burden for NI (total DALY figure). This is higher than the UK average (2,540.61; 7.95%), and higher than all other regions; Scotland (2,438.77; 6.62%), England (2,541.71; 8.09%) and Wales (2,453.16; 7.11%).

Mental Disorders are the leading cause of YLD in NI and 2nd in the other UK Regions. Mental Disorders contribute to 2,940.6 YLD per 100,000 in NI, compared with 2,541.16 in England, 2,437.78 in Scotland, and 2,452.47 in Wales. The GBD study includes the subcategories of Depressive and Anxiety Disorders. Figure 3 (appendix) shows that Depressive Disorders are the second highest contributor to years lived with disability across all regions, however the rate per 100,000 is highest in NI; 1,055.73 (England 1,049.86, Scotland 967.3, Wales 996.92). Anxiety disorders also contribute to a higher number of YLD in NI ranking as the 3rd leading contributor to YLD (1,177.65), compared to the 5th elsewhere (England 807.3, Scotland 792.38, Wales 806.72).

Half of the cases of mental illness start by age fourteen and 75% develop before a person reaches their mid-twenties. GBD data allows age group analysis. Figure 4 (appendix) shows that Depressive Disorders are the leading cause of years lived with disability among 15 to 49 years

olds across the UK; England 1,353.68; Scotland 1,310.38; Wales 1,343.17; NI 1,425.22. However, Anxiety Disorders have a significantly higher impact on YLDs in the NI population for this age group (ranked 2nd in NI 1,177.65); England 807.3; Scotland 792.38; Wales 806.72.

The GBD study highlighted the differences between the UK Regions in relation to disability caused by mental illness. It shows that mental illness is a leading cause of disability in NI, with increased years lived with disability attributed to both depressive and anxiety disorders in NI compared with the other UK Regions. It shows that people in NI are developing mental ill-health at younger ages than their counterparts in the other UK Regions, specifically in relation to anxiety disorders.

In the UK in 2023 the Office of National Statistics (ONS) found the most prevalent health condition reported by the working-age population was depression, bad nerves or anxiety (5 million people, 12%). This was also the largest health condition reported by or recorded as the reason for inactivity among those who are economically inactive because of long-term sickness, with 53% (1.35 million people in 2023) reporting it as a health condition, higher than the 48% who reported it in January to March 2019. This aligns with the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey results, published in their cost of living and depression in adults article between 29 September and 23 October 2022 where 59% of those who were inactive because of long-term sickness said they experienced moderate to severe depressive symptoms, far higher than the prevalence for those employed or self-employed (15%), or those inactive but for other reasons excluding being retired (24%).

Census data can be used to establish the proportion of the NI population with both mental and physical disorders. 14.67% of young people aged 0-17 years and 27.55% of people aged 18 or older, who had a physical health problem or disability that limits day-to-day activities also had an Emotional or Mental Health problem expected to last 12 months or more.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Impact of the Conflict/ Troubles

Over twenty years ago the World Mental Health Survey Initiative study which found that the rate of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in NI at 5.1%, was the highest of all the participating countries. Our history of violence accounted for the excess, with rates higher in the 39% of the population who had a conflict related traumatic event.

Sadly, a recent study found that the situation now is actually worse, with 6.1% of the population reporting PTSD or complex PTSD. Now 17.6% report having four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), compared with 7.2% in 2005. ACEs carry an elevated risk of almost every negative, physical and mental health condition, and are associated with much poorer outcomes in education and employment. The evidence shows how the impact of the conflict continues to be felt; in the 2023 NI Life and Times study 29.9% reported that the conflict impacted their mental health. Similarly, 30% reported a traumatic conflict-specific event in the 2024 study of trauma and childhood adversities, and almost half the population had witnessed conflict related violence (47.5%).

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Appendix: Supporting Figures

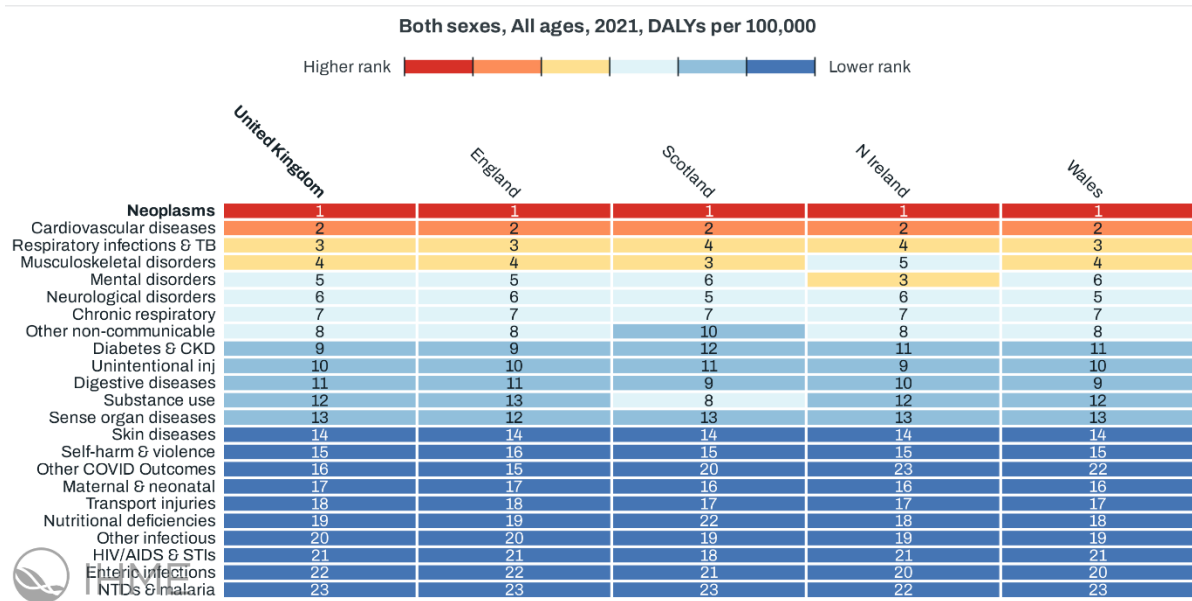


Figure 1: DALYs per 100,000

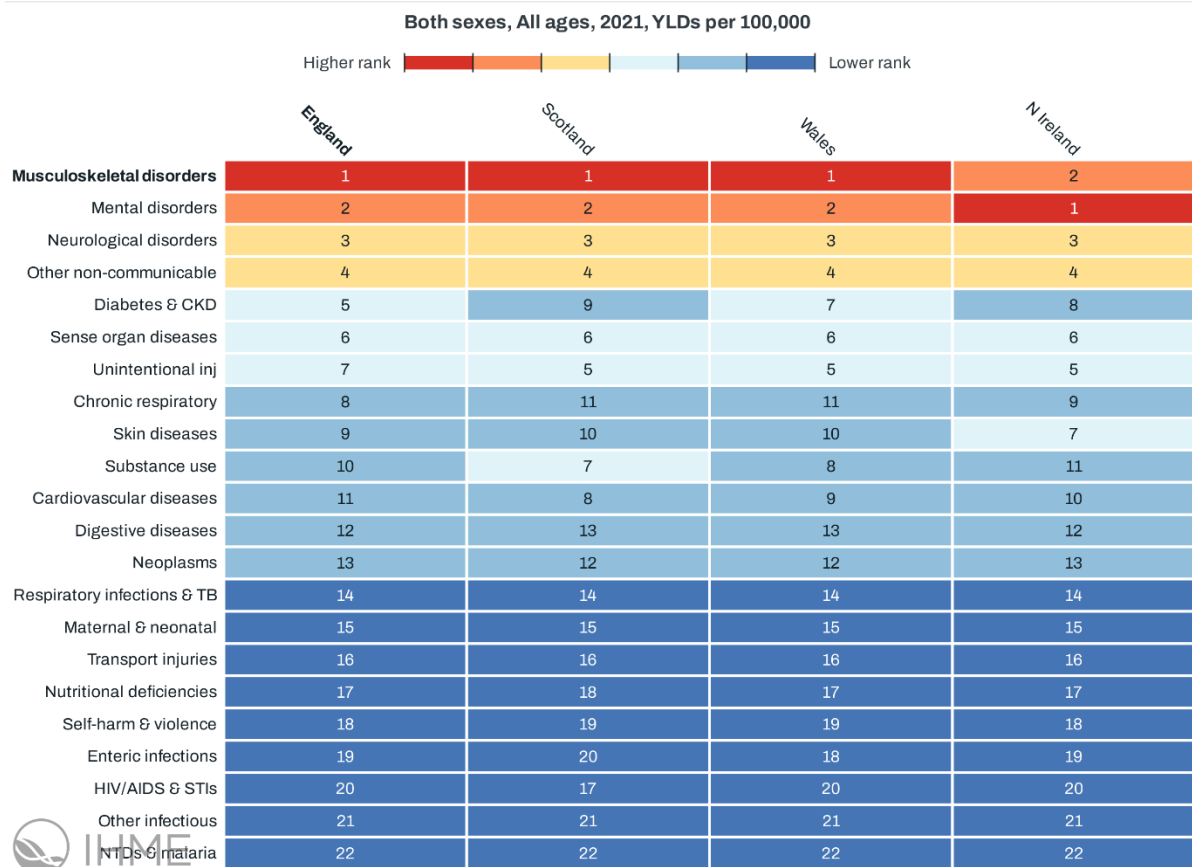


Figure 2: Years Lived with Disability per 100,000

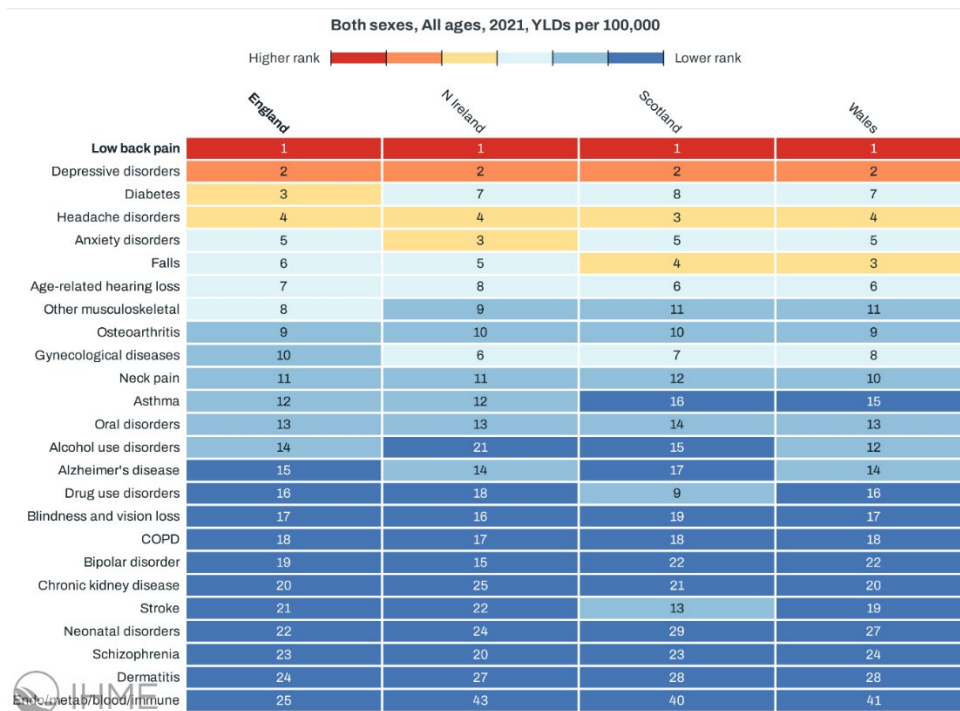


Figure 3: YLDs per 100,000 by subcategory

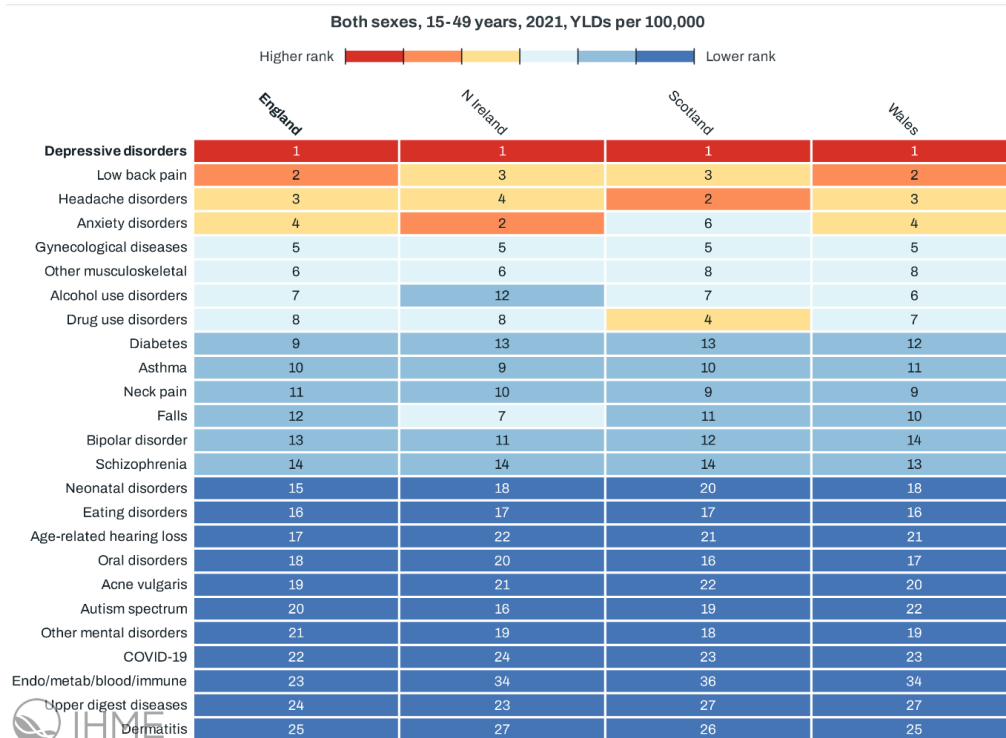


Figure 4: YLDs per 100,000 among 15-49year olds