

♂ YOUNG MEN'S HEALTH MATTERS



Louise
O'Reilly TD *Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Health*





Introduction

There have been many improvements across the health service, however, despite the changes and advances in health care, young men's health needs have oftentimes been forgotten.

It is crucial that young men take care of their health and take a stake in their physical and mental wellbeing. To do that it is important that they are informed and educated about what is best for their health and that the health service has the services in place to respond to the needs of young men.

For a variety of reasons some young men may not be aware of their different health needs and may struggle to know how and where to access services.

There is a need for the health service, politicians, policy-makers, and society to recognise the health needs of young men and make sure our health service is responsive to them.

This document seeks to outline Sinn Féin's vision for young men's health and to show that young men's health matters.



Cancer

Cancer can affect anyone of any gender at any age. However, there are a number of cancers which can particularly affect young men, and which they need to be aware of.

Young men are more likely than either younger children or older adults to be diagnosed with certain cancers, such as testicular cancer, colorectal cancer, and skin cancer, amongst many others.

Testicular Cancer

Testicular cancer mainly affects younger men (15–34 years). Around 164 men are diagnosed every year in this State. While testicular cancer is very treatable and usually curable, embarrassment about symptoms can often prevent some young men from seeking medical help when the disease is at its earliest, most curable stage

A lack of education for young men who are at a high risk for testicular cancer can also be a barrier to medical help being sought at the earliest available opportunity. These risk factors include men who have a family history of testicular cancer; personal history of testicular cancer; undescended testicle at birth, and infertility.

It is essential that that all young men are educated about testicular cancer, know the warning signs and how to properly check for these warning signs, and how and where to access the services they need.

Colorectal Cancer

People often associate colorectal and bowel cancer as something which affects older people. While this has previously been true, new data and studies show a sharp increase among adults in their 20s and 30s.

Studies from the British Medical Journal and data from cancer registries show an increased rate of colorectal cancer among young men.

The BMJ published an article this year which pointed to worsening diet, obesity, and lack of exercise as probable major contributors to colorectal and bowel cancers.

Tackling colorectal cancer among young people needs a multi-pronged approach including education and information about the symptoms, encouraging a healthy lifestyle, and expanding colorectal screening for younger men that have strong risk factors such as a known inherited condition.



Skin Cancer

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in this State and around 12,000 people are diagnosed with skin cancer every year. Skin cancer is another cancer which people associate with older people, but it is often found in young men.

Even if you do not develop skin cancer when you are young, how you treat your skin can have an impact on whether you develop it later in life.

Looking after your skin is the number one thing that young men can do to avoid skin cancer. The majority of skin cancers can be prevented by avoiding harsh exposure to the sun, applying sun screen, and looking after your skin, as well as paying attention to any early skin changes and seeking medical health if you notice changes.

Sinn Féin advocates:

- An education and awareness campaign on cancers which have a high incidence among young men
- Targeted screening for younger men that have strong risk factors such as a known inherited colorectal condition
- Investment in R&D for new methods of cancer detection
- Rollout of HPV vaccine to boys
- Increasing awareness of the health benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle

Problem drinking and alcoholism

Although alcohol consumption has dropped in this State in recent years there is still a high level of alcohol consumption, and alcohol related harm.

Alcohol causes over 1,000 deaths a year in this State, or 3 deaths a day. One in four deaths of young men aged 15-39 in this State is due to alcohol.

Drinking alcohol is perfectly fine in moderation and is often the preferred way for young men to socialise, however, problem drinking does cause significant harm to the individual involved and their friends and loved ones.

Problem drinking, and alcoholism can also result in the neglect of responsibilities at home, work, or school/college as well as damaging physical and mental health as links between alcohol and cancer as well as suicide are well established.

It is important that young men are made aware of the signs of problem drinking and what to do if they or someone else needs help. It is also tough for people to seek help, so it is important that services are signposted. When help and treatment is needed, the health service needs to be able to respond to their needs and has adequate services and treatment to do that.



Sinn Féin advocates:

- Increase the number of addiction counsellors and ensure regional balance
- Additional detoxification beds within the health service
- Ensure residential programmes have enough funding to meet demand
- Increase awareness of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and ensure AA is properly funded and available across the State



Drug abuse

Problem drug use is first and foremost a public health issue. The provision of services aimed at reducing the harm caused by drug use and safeguarding the health of drug users is central.

The 2014/15 drugs prevalence survey found that one in four Irish adults (26.4%) has tried an illegal drug at least once in their lifetime. Trends over the past decade point to an increase in the rate of recent and current drug use, with the greatest increases in amongst younger people aged 15-34, in particular among young men.

Drug deaths in this State in 2014 stood at 214, amongst the highest in the EU, behind only Estonia, Sweden and Norway per head of population. 78% of those who died in this State in 2014 were male.

Despite the lives of so many – predominantly young men – being on the line, funding for the health services vitally needed to save these lives has been severely cut.

Every effort should be made to educate people about the harmful impact of drug taking, personally and societally, and every effort should be made to reduce drug taking among the population and young men.

However, the reality is that people take illegal drugs and therefore, we cannot ignore this and we must put in place education and awareness as well as significant harm reduction measures to help these people as well as avenues for help and recovery.

Despite this, over the last number of years, there has been a reduction in the expenditure and allocations directly attributable to drugs programmes. The resulting cumulative cuts have had a negative impact on service provision. There needs to be significant investment to restore existing services or develop new services particularly aimed at reducing harm caused by drug use and which will safeguard the health of drug users.

Sinn Féin advocates:

- Invest to tackle addiction through the National Drug Strategy
- Introduce Low Threshold Residential Stabilisation Services
- Increase the number of addiction counsellors and ensure regional balance
- Rollout of medically supervised injecting centres
- Provision of drug testing facilities at festivals

Steroid and PED abuse

In recent years the use of anabolic steroids and performance enhancing drugs has increased amongst young men across the State.

The problem is growing, and it is also evidenced by the fact that An Garda Síochána and the Revenue’s customs service seized almost 500,000 anabolic steroid dosage units in tablet and capsules in 2017, compared to just over 14,000 units in 2016.



Muscle dysmorphia and the promotion of almost unachievable body figures through the media and social media can be a trigger for men to start taking steroids and PEDs.

Muscle dysmorphia, often referred to as bigorexia, has become more common in recent years. People with bigorexia resort to many measures to increase their muscle mass such as working out compulsively including excessive weightlifting, often prioritising working out over family and friends, excessive attention to diet, misuse of high protein diet, and the misuse of steroids and other muscle-building drugs.

Steroid abuse is incredibly dangerous and can cause serious, and sometimes fatal, health damage. The side effects of steroid use and abuse can be particularly damaging, such as hypertension, violent outbursts and psychological and mental health impacts, liver damage, gynecomastia, and compromised reproductive functions.

Therefore, the issue of steroid and PED abuse needs to be discussed in the mainstream so that people who have muscle dysmorphia, or who misuse anabolic steroids and PEDs can seek help. Similarly, the health service needs to make sure the proper structures and resources are in place to help those who present with muscle dysmorphia or those who abuse steroids or PEDs for whatever reason.

Sinn Féin advocates:

- Increase awareness around muscle dysmorphia and eating disorders amongst young men
- Ensure access to addiction counsellors with specific skillset of dealing with steroid and PED use
- An awareness campaign about steroid and PED abuse in all sports clubs and gyms



Problem gambling

Problem gambling is a condition where the affected individual has a continuous urge to gamble despite harmful negative consequences or, indeed, a desire to stop.

In 2017, industry experts H2 Gambling Capital produced a report into global gambling losses across the world that found that we have the highest online gambling losses in the world and the third highest gambling losses overall, per head of capita.

To put that in real numbers, people in this State lose around €2.2 billion a year gambling or €470 per adult.

Incidences of problem and harmful gambling are particularly high amongst young people. Indeed, between 2015 and 2017 90% of those treated by HSE for problem gambling were young men.

Many people gamble and do not experience a problem, however, there are many young men who do gamble and who experience a significant problem which can then affect their livelihoods, their health, and their relationships with friends and family.

We need a health service that is aware of the needs of problem gamblers and has services to meet their needs. In addition, we need proper regulation of the industry from government.

Sinn Féin advocates:

- Increase the number of addiction counsellors, including counsellors with expertise in gambling addiction
- Rollout of a targeted problem gambling awareness campaign
- Introduce modern legislation on gambling which takes account of and accommodates a faster response to future, technological advances in order to ensure comprehensive coverage of gaming, gambling and betting whether landbased or online
- Establish an Independent Gambling Regulator whose functions would include administering a Problem Gambling Fund in order to help minimise problem gambling, to be financed by a mandatory levy or license fee on the industry

Smoking

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in this State with almost 6,000 smokers dying each year from tobacco related diseases. Smoking related deaths are mainly due to cancers, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD) and heart disease.

Smoking harms nearly every organ of the body, causing many different illnesses and diseases. If you are a long-term smoker, on average, your life expectancy is about 10 years less than a non-smoker.

The younger you are when you start smoking, the more likely you are to smoke for longer and to die early from smoking.

The benefits of quitting are immediate, physical health gains with regard to respiratory health, pulmonary and cardiovascular function, reproductive health and gastro-intestinal problems and mental health gains, including a reduction in the prevalence of anxiety and depression. There is also financial gain given the average smoker spends €4,000 a year on their habit.

That is why it is important that there are targeted smoking cessation courses and pathways for young men. Most smokers think about quitting and many have tried but, trying to quit without support is extremely difficult. It is important that supports are in place for people when they plan to quit smoking.



Sinn Féin advocates:

- Increase funding for smoking cessation courses
- Provision of nicotine and non-nicotine replacement therapies from HSE

Mental Health

This State has one of the highest rates of mental health illness in Europe, with mental health disorders, such as anxiety, bipolar, schizophrenia, and depression featuring high amongst young men. Indeed, in 2019 men accounted for in the region of eight in 10 deaths by suicide – it is vital that our health service and society responds better to the mental health needs of young men.

Recently conversation about mental health difficulties has focused on young people – young men in particular. This demographic has long struggled to have the space to talk about mental health issues.

However, the societal advances have not been matched in the provision and access to mental health services.

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as a “state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” That is what our mental health services should aspire to and should be funded to do so.

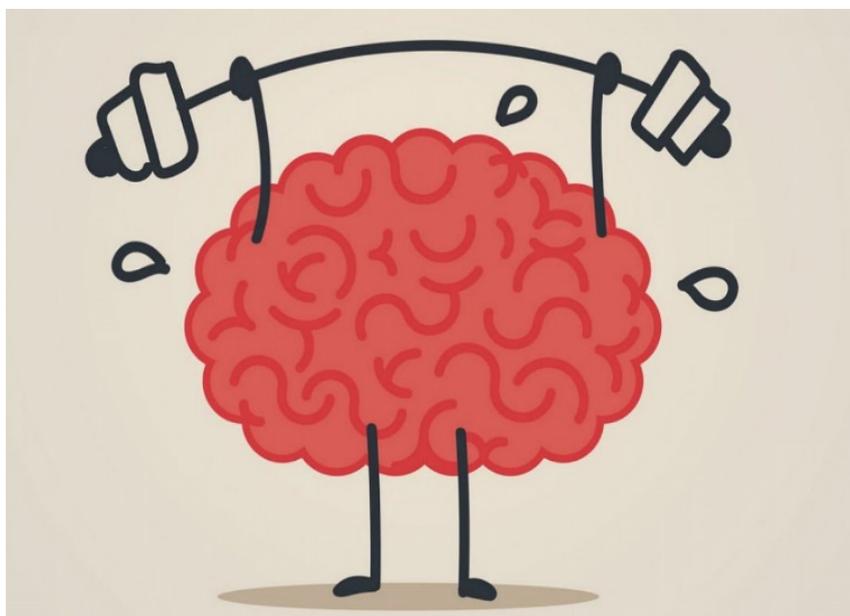
Young men and depression

Men tend to be less adept at recognising symptoms of depression. Oftentimes they are likely to deny or hide their feelings or mask them with other behaviours.

In addition to the well know symptoms of depression such as despondent mood, sleep loss, loss of interest in work and hobbies, they are also more likely to experience what is called “stealth” depression symptoms such as anger, substance abuse, and agitation.

The reasons for this can be biological, psychological, with social factors and lifestyle choices also playing a part.

It is important firstly that societally we continue to encourage young men to speak up and not to try to tough out depression on their own. Education around taking steps for help





are also important as young men with depression respond well to self-help steps such as reaching out for social support, exercising, switching to a healthy diet, and making other lifestyle changes.

Proper assessment and diagnosis are essential so that a recovery plan from depression can be designed and treatment can commence. Along with having proper assessment and diagnosis, we need to have well-funded and resourced services to deliver treatment to those who need it.

Sinn Féin advocates:

- Advance the roll-out of 24/7 crisis intervention services
- Increase funding for counselling in primary care
- Provide additional support for roll-out of Suicide Prevention Training for frontline public sector workers
- Ensure out-of-hours mental health nursing cover in every A&E Department and Prison
- Additional Psychologists, Mental Health and Intellectual Disability Nurses, and Suicide Crisis Assessment Nurses

Sexual health

Young adults, in particular young men, are more likely to report having initiated sexual intercourse at an early age, and men are more likely to report a greater number of lifetime sexual partners.

With that in mind it is essential that young men are educated about sexual health and pathways for services and treatment for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI).

But increasing knowledge of sexual and reproductive health issues for young men must go further than that, it must challenge common stereotypes about sexual health issues. It should consider fertility decisions, sexual function, contraception and pregnancy involvement, consent, sexual abuse, and even sexual exploitation as young men's health issues.

Young men should be able to access high quality information and services to promote their sexual health, and where needs be, their reproductive health.

Sexual health services

It is important that young men who are sexually active, particularly those with multiple or short-term partners, get tested regularly as it is an important preventative approach to STIs and HIV.

There has been a 7% increase in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in this State in 2018 compared to 2017. According to the HSE young people aged between 15-24 and men who have sex with men (MSM) were those who suffered most.

Unfortunately, funding for sexual health services has not kept pace with demand and this has caused a litany of problems for young people and those working in the services.

The main consequence of underfunded services is that regular STI testing remains inaccessible for most young men. According to HSE data, public clinics that offer testing



can have waiting lists that range from 1-7 weeks. Further to this, only 43% of the 23 public STI clinics across the state offers walk-in services.

It is vital that sexual health services are properly funded, accessible, and designed to take into account the needs and fears of young people.

Sinn Féin advocates:

- Roll-out of education and awareness campaigns around STIs and HIV
- Increase funding for sexual health clinics to ensure that walk-in services are available in every clinic in the state
- Increase staffing levels at sexual clinics

Gay men's health services

Despite the progress of recent years, inequalities continue to face the LGBTQI community, particularly in the area of sexual health services for gay and bisexual men.

Unfortunately, funding for gay men's health services have been cut while service need has increased. This has resulted in thousands of men, in particular young men, being turned away from sexual health clinics. A study by ACT UP Dublin found that funding to the Gay Men's Health Service was halved between 2009 and 2016, while new HIV diagnoses amongst gay and bisexual men have doubled in the same period.

This is an almost criminal dereliction of responsibility from successive governments and the health service, and incredibly unfair on those men who need these services.

To ensure that all men, and gay and bisexual men, have access to the services they need then we need to make sure sexual health services are properly funded and able to keep up with demand and also ensure that community-based HIV testing services such as KnowNow are able to continue their great work.

Furthermore, scientific developments in terms of treatment and prevention mean that the eradication of HIV/AIDS is within our grasp. In order to do this adequately fund PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) needs to be made available through the HSE on the basis of need and not ability to pay.

Sinn Féin advocates:

- Increased funding for the gay men's health services and community-based HIV testing services
- Access to PrEP for men who have sex with men on the basis of need and not ability to pay

Fitness and Exercise

Engaging in physical activity has numerous physical and mental health benefits in the short and long term. Young men should try to engage in aerobic and strength exercises in order to improve their health. Apart from the individual health benefits, there is evidence on the positive direct and indirect social benefits of participation in sport and physical activity.

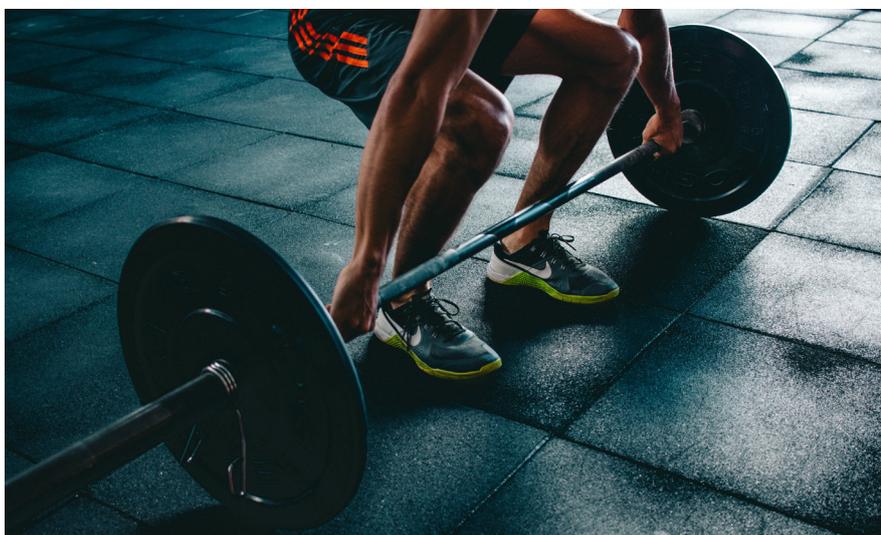
However, exercise should be about much more than playing football, running, or going to the gym, a healthy physical lifestyle should be built into one's daily routine, such as walking instead of driving or taking the stairs instead of the lift.

There can be some difficulties for young men to improving fitness and exercising, such as finding the right fit, family, work, or educational commitments, a lack of facilities or proximity to sports teams, the cost of and access to gym's and other issues.

Helping people to live healthier lives needs to be a priority for any government and that means making physical activity more accessible through investing in County Council gyms and swimming pools, increasing the amenities in public parks, and ensuring sporting facilities are more generally available.

Sinn Féin advocates:

- Increase funding to deliver local, public amenities such as gyms, swimming pools, public sports pitches and sporting facilities
- Ensure schools have access to proper sports facilities
- Reform the sports capital grant application programme to ensure the process is streamlined, straightforward, and transparent



Conclusion

As stated by the United Nations:

“Health, in all respects, physical and mental, is a fundamental human right”.

Health is the foundation for well-being and participation in many aspects of life.

Oftentimes, young men are a section of our society who are overlooked when it comes to their health. This cannot be allowed to continue and more must be done to ensure that the specific services they need are available, accessible, and that their health needs are met.

We do not claim to have identified all the issues or provided all the solutions in the delivery of health services for young men across the State. We have strived to produce a document which highlights some of the specific health needs of young men, proffer solutions, and show that young men’s health matters to Sinn Féin.



www.sinnfein.ie



Louise
O'Reilly TD *Sinn Féin Spokesperson on Health*

📍 : Unit 1 The Coachyard, Main Street, Swords, Co. Dublin.
(BEHIND THE COCK TAVERN)

📍 : 12B Railway Street, Balbriggan, Co. Dublin.

☎ : 01 840 5081 or 01 618 3093

✉ : louise.oreilly@oir.ie

