

Consultations with doctors can take place in doctors' offices or clinics, in hospital outpatient departments or, in some cases, in patients' own homes. In many European countries (e.g., Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Spain and the United Kingdom), patients are required or given incentives to consult a general practitioner (GP) about any new episode of illness. The GP may then refer them to a specialist, if indicated. In other countries (e.g., Austria, the Czech Republic, Iceland and Luxembourg), patients may approach specialists directly.

The number of doctor consultations per person per year is highest in Hungary, the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic, and the lowest in Cyprus, Finland and Sweden (Figure 3.2.1). The EU average is 6.3 consultations per person per year, with most member states reporting four to seven visits per person per year. Cultural factors appear to play a role in explaining some of the variations across countries, although certain health system characteristics may also play a role. Some countries which pay their doctors mainly by fee-for-service tend to have above-average consultation rates (e.g., Belgium and Germany), while other countries that have mostly salaried doctors tend to have below-average rates (e.g., Finland and Sweden).

In Finland and Sweden, the low number of doctor consultations may also be explained partly by the fact that nurses and other health professionals play an important role in primary care centres, lessening the need for consultations with doctors (Delamaire and Lafortune, 2010).

In many European countries, the average number of doctor consultations per person has increased since 2000. This is consistent with the increase in the number of doctors per capita in most countries over the past decade (see Indicator 3.1). In the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, there has been a substantial reduction in the number of doctor consultations per capita over the past decade, although the number remains well above the EU average. In Spain also, there has been a marked decline in the number of doctor consultations per person since 2000.

The number of doctor consultations varies not only across countries, but also among different population groups in each country. A 2012 OECD study, using the first wave of the European health interview survey and other national surveys carried out between 2006 and 2009, provided evidence on inequality in doctor consultations by income group in a number of European countries, particularly for consultations with medical specialists (Devaux and de Looper, 2012).

The information on doctor consultations can also be used to estimate the number of consultations per doctor. This indicator should not be taken as a measure of doctors' productivity, since consultations can vary in length and effectiveness, and because it excludes the work doctors do on hospital inpatients, administration and research. There are other comparability limitations reported in the box below on "Definition and comparability". Keeping these reservations in mind, the estimated number of consultations

per doctor is highest in central and eastern European countries (Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Poland and the Czech Republic) and in Turkey, and is the lowest in Sweden (Figure 3.2.2).

Definition and comparability

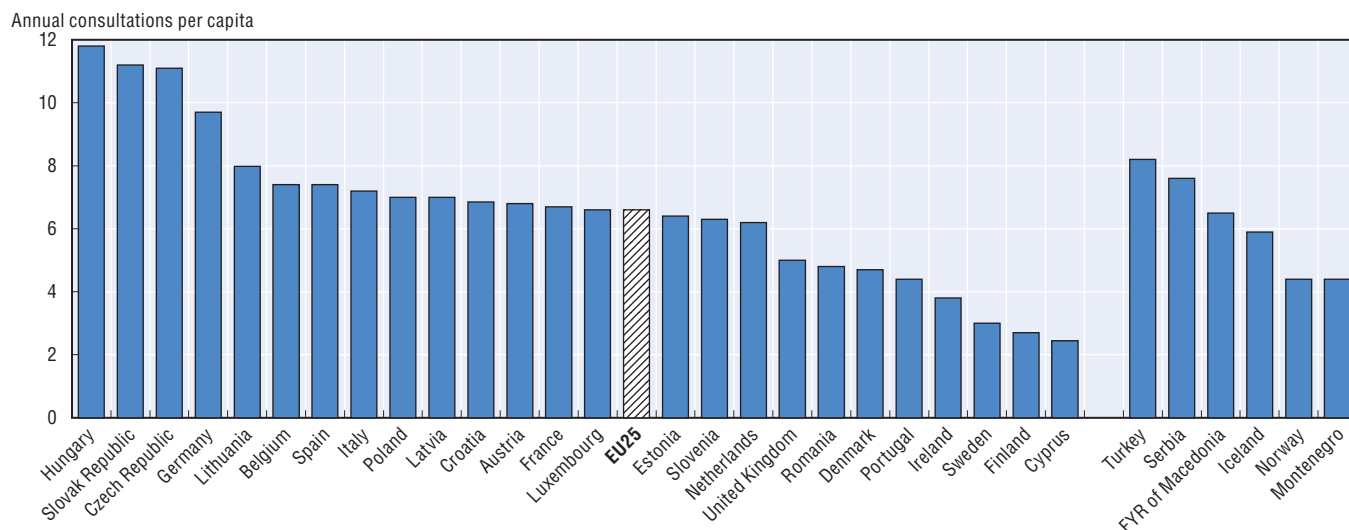
Consultations with doctors refer to the number of contacts with physicians, including both generalists and specialists. There are variations across countries in the coverage of different types of consultations, notably in outpatient departments of hospitals. The data come mainly from administrative sources, although in some countries (Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) the data come from health interview surveys. Estimates from administrative sources tend to be higher than those from surveys because of problems with recall and non-response rates.

In Hungary, the figures include consultations for diagnostic exams, such as CT and MRI scans (resulting in an over-estimation). The figures for the Netherlands exclude contacts for maternal and child care. The data for Portugal exclude visits to private practitioners, while those for the United Kingdom exclude consultations with specialists outside hospital outpatient departments (resulting in an under-estimation). In Germany, the data include only the number of cases of physicians' treatment according to reimbursement regulations under the Social Health Insurance Scheme (a case only counts the first contact over a three-month period, even if the patient consults a doctor more often, leading to an under-estimation of consultations with doctors). Telephone contacts are included in some countries (e.g. Ireland, Spain and the United Kingdom). In Turkey, a majority of consultations with doctors occur in outpatient departments in hospitals.

References

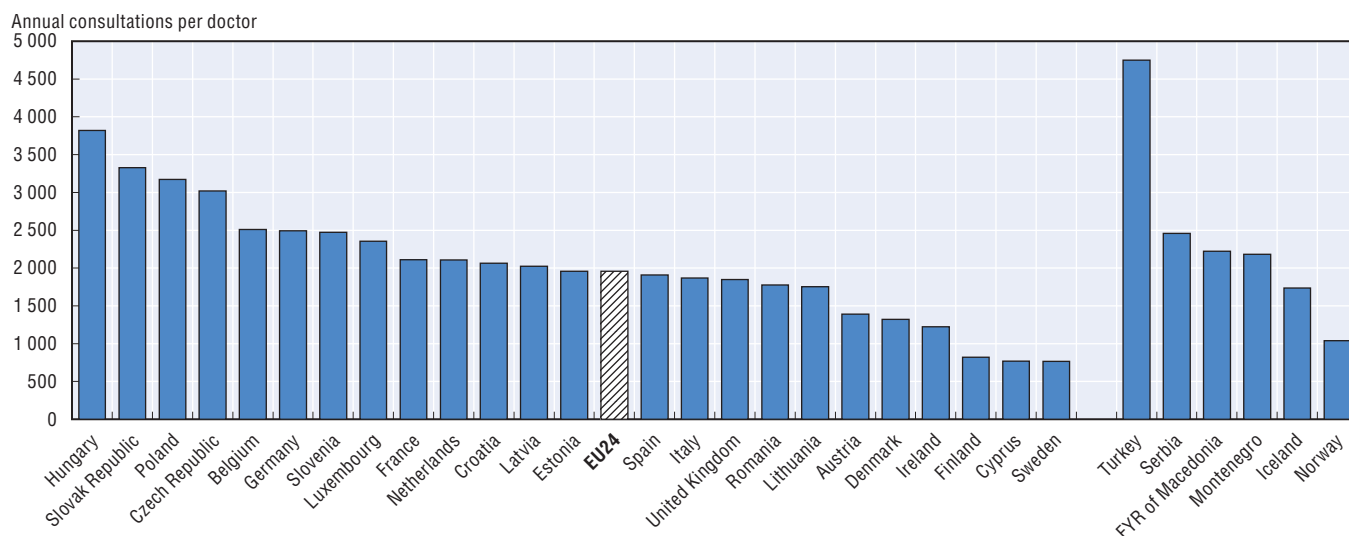
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3.2.1. Number of doctor consultations per capita, 2012 (or nearest year)




Source: OECD Health Statistics 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/health-data-en>; Eurostat Statistics Database; WHO Europe Health for All Database.

3.2.2. Estimated number of consultations per doctor, 2012 (or nearest year)



Source: OECD Health Statistics 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/health-data-en>; Eurostat Statistics Database; WHO Europe Health for All Database.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933155568>



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