



Healthier ageing alone will not prevent rising care demand in Europe

Author: Axel Börsch-Supan

Almost everyone who reaches very old age will eventually need care, but the age at which this need begins differs widely across Europe. BB-Future research shows that while healthier ageing could reduce future pressure on care systems, Europe is still likely to face substantially rising care demand over the coming decades.

Key takeaways for policymakers:

- Even under optimistic assumptions about healthier ageing, the demand for care across Europe is projected to increase substantially over the next decades.
- Most Europeans who reach very old age will eventually require care, but when this need begins differs across countries.
- Care systems will need to prepare for sustained growth in demand for care, while remaining flexible to different future health scenarios.
- Health outcomes of younger generations are improving more slowly than earlier cohorts.

When does poor health become a need for care?

Europe's demand for care will increase. More people will need support with everyday activities, from cooking to managing finances, mobility and personal care. However, the extent of the needs and when they begin, will depend largely on people's health as they age.

The EU-funded project BB-Future examines how future health trends could affect care requirements across Europe. There is no single universally accepted definition of when poor health becomes a need for care, and thresholds partly depend on social norms and care systems across countries. The project tackles this by looking at whether people can manage everyday activities independently, such as bathing, shopping and handling finances.

The research makes use of data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) – a Europe-wide survey which offers a reliable picture of the socio-economic reality of ageing societies. BB-Future researchers found remarkable differences in current care needs across Europe. Most people who are 95 or older eventually require care. But in some countries, care needs begin much earlier than in others. For example, in Poland, around 35% of women already need care at around the age people are expected to live in Poland, compared with 25% in Sweden; even though Swedish women live around four years longer. Figure 1 illustrates these large cross-country differences in the age at which women begin to need care.

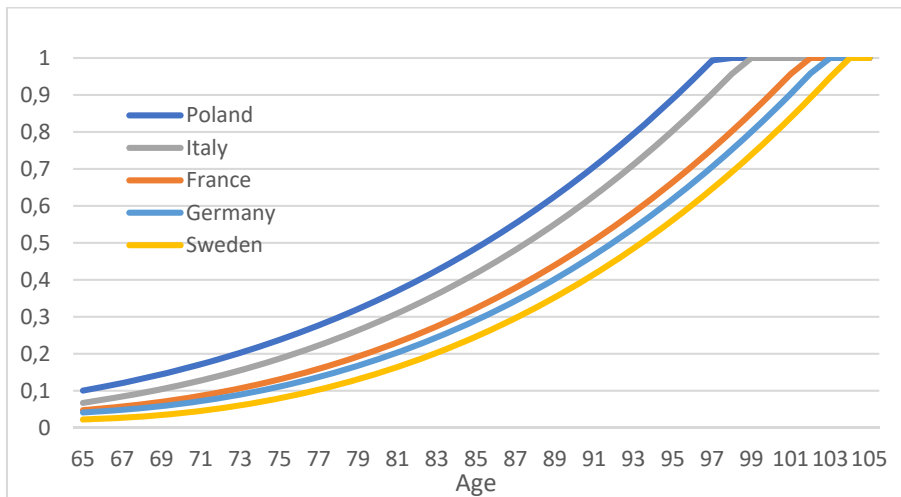


Figure 1: Share of population in need of care (women) in Europe. Source: SHARE Wave 9 data

Europe’s rising care demand is only beginning

For decades, Europeans not only lived longer, but also became healthier at older ages. Younger generations are no longer experiencing the same health improvements as previous generations. This has major policy implications, as it means that Europeans may continue to live longer, while also spending more years in poor health and in need of care.

To assess these risks, BB-Future combined Eurostat population projections with health scenarios. While future population ageing can be projected with reasonable confidence, future health developments are much harder to predict. Therefore, three scenarios are considered:

- Optimistic: longer lives combined with better health
- Baseline: longer lives with moderate health improvements
- Pessimistic: longer lives with little improvement in health

With the optimistic assumption, the number of people needing care will rise over the next 25–30 years, before gradually declining as the baby-boom generation passes away (figure 2 below). Under the pessimistic assumption, care demand will continue to rise and the number of people across Europe needing care could increase by around 70% by 2060. Under the baseline scenario, care demand is projected to rise by about 30% and to remain at that higher level after 2060.

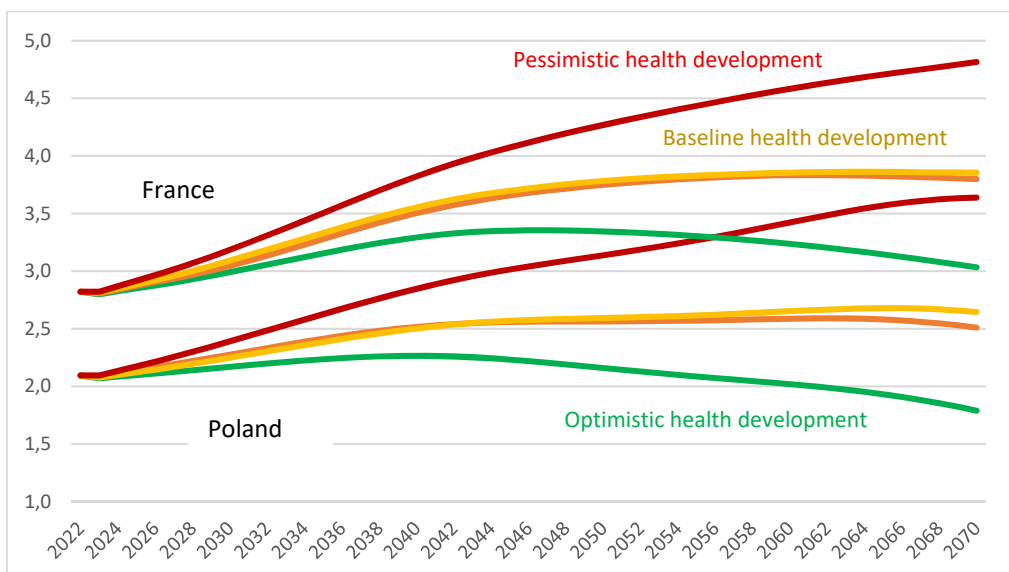


Figure 2: Projected number of people in need of care in France and Poland (in millions). Source: Author’s own calculations.

Care as a test of Europe's fairness

Providing enough suitable long-term care is becoming one of Europe's central social challenges. Population ageing will increase care demand in every Member State over the coming decades, even under optimistic health scenarios. Even healthier ageing is unlikely to offset rising care needs before 2060.

Governments in ageing societies face a dual challenge: ensuring adequate care for older people while also investing more in prevention, healthier lifestyles, and earlier health interventions.

How many hours of care will actually be needed in the future? This is the subject of Digest No. 3.

Contact: info@bb-future.eu

Acknowledgment:

This project is funded by the European Union under Grant Agreement 101093849 — BB-Future as part of HORIZON-CL2-2022-TRANSFORMATIONS-01. We are grateful for the generous support. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

