

# Information Sheet for Community Managed Organisations (CMOs)

## PHYSICAL HEALTH AND CARE FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

Mental health and physical health are inextricably linked. People living with mental illness are at significantly greater risk of developing major physical health issues than the wider population.

Physical health issues develop as a result of a complexity of factors including the mental illness itself, side-effects of some medications, the lifestyle necessitated by socio-economic circumstances and health care system responses.<sup>1 2</sup> The higher rates of physical illness often remain undetected or untreated.<sup>3</sup> People with persistent mental health conditions live between 10-32 years less than the general population.<sup>4</sup>



This information sheet outlines the physical health risks faced by people with long term mental health issues. The Questions throughout encourage reflection on approaches to supporting consumers.

*“Today I am on a medication regime which works for me mentally, but the medications have led to enormous weight gain—a problem I never had before.*

*The weight gain and omnipresent exhaustion, has given me a new set of mental health issues.*

*Sometimes when I am physically unwell—I know doctors or people around me don’t always take me seriously; they think it’s my mental illness talking”*

Maddison, NSW

**Source:**

National Mental Health Commission, 2012; *A Contributing Life: The 2012 National Report Card.*

# FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO POOR PHYSICAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

## Supporting self-management

It is important that people with mental health conditions are supported to self-manage their physical health. Health professionals, support workers, family and friends, can all play a role in encouraging practical steps to better physical health including supporting access to routine health screenings, physical health checks and a local GP.<sup>5</sup>

CMOs are in a unique position to engage with people about their physical health and wellbeing. CMOs can provide opportunities for people to review their physical health and encourage them to address any unmet needs. People always have a voice and remain at the centre of decision-making about services that impact them.

**Q** How does your organisation support people to self-manage their physical health?

## Impact of treatment and medications

Mental illness, its effects and treatment significantly influence the choices people make about the types of food they eat, the amount of exercise they get and how much they smoke or use other substances. Such choices can lead to poor physical health outcomes. Many people's choices are affected by their mental illness, related medication and socio-economic conditions.

**Q** Does your organisation have a health promoting environment and culture?

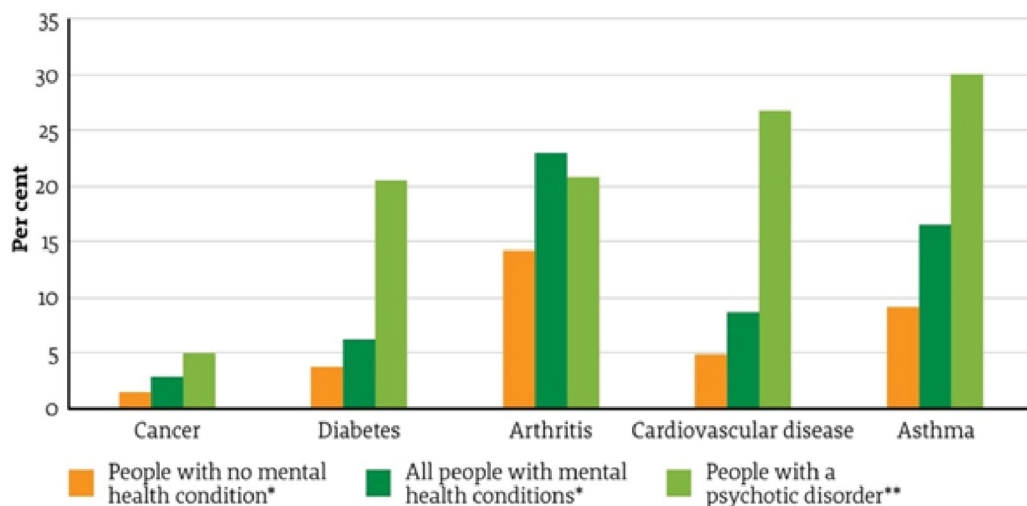
People with long term mental illness experience far higher rates of physical health issues including kidney, liver, heart and lung diseases and metabolic syndrome than the wider population. Metabolic syndrome\* is a collection of symptoms that often occur together and can increase risk of stroke or heart disease and Type 2 diabetes. Studies also show increased rates of high blood pressure, respiratory disease, sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs) and osteoporosis.<sup>6</sup>

\*routine screening relevant to sex, age and lifestyle.

**Q** Do the people who use your service know about the recommended health screens and health checks available to them?

Almost all antipsychotic medications, especially clozapine and olanzapine, significantly increase appetite, food cravings and weight gain. Weight gain during antipsychotic treatment has been reported in up to 60% of people. The second generation antipsychotic medications are also highly associated with diabetes, dyslipidaemia, insulin resistance and the metabolic syndrome.<sup>7</sup>

**Q** Do you know if the consumer sees a GP regularly to discuss routine health screening, weight management and medication options?



**Figure 1.** Percentage of people with a mental health challenge experiencing a long-term physical health condition.

**Sources:**  
\*National Health Survey 2007-08; \*\*National Survey of Psychotic Illness 2010.

## Diet / Nutrition

People with persistent mental illnesses generally have poorer nutrition than the general population, which impacts on their physical health including increased risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. They typically consume a diet higher in fat and lower in fibre than the general population, along with a decreased intake of fruit and vegetables. Weight gain can be reduced by consulting dietitians and other relevant professionals

**Q** *Is your organisation encouraging conversations with people on how to decrease health risks through consumption of a healthy balanced diet?*

## Smoking and substance abuse

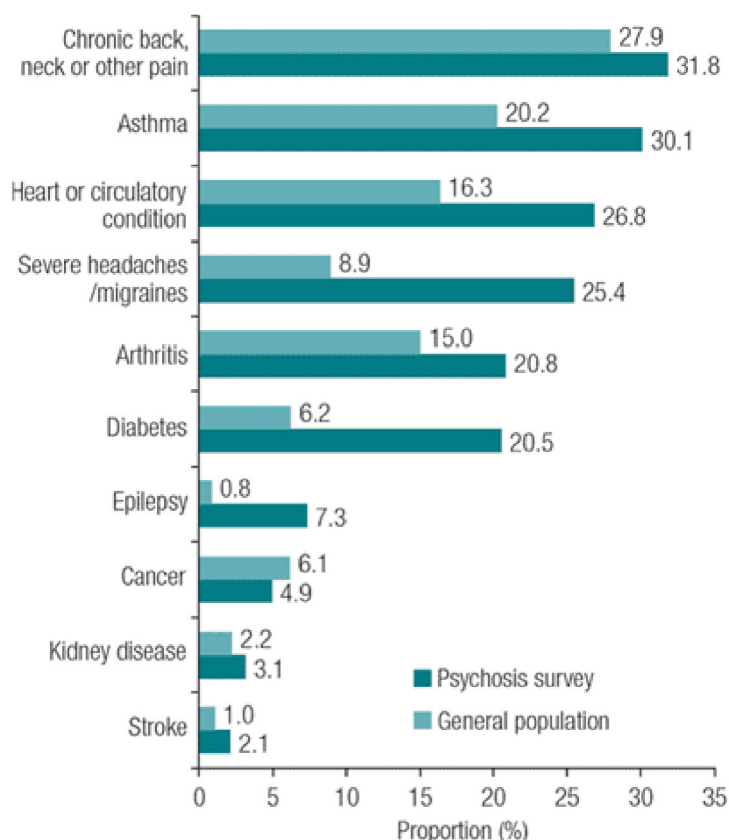
People with long term mental health issues smoke at a rate of two to three times higher than that of the general population.<sup>8</sup> Many people with mental illness use smoking as a coping strategy. While the relationship between smoking and mental health is at times complex, the evidence shows that people with a mental health problem do want to quit and can do so without adverse impacts on their mental health.<sup>9</sup>

**Q** *How can/does your service support people to cut back or quit smoking, if it is something they want to do?*

## Exercise

Physical activity and fitness levels for people with mental illness are significantly lower than those of the general population and may be related to their symptoms and/or medication. Lack of physical activity contributes to weight gain and increases the risk for cardiovascular disease. It can be challenging to exercise for people who are experiencing asthma, chronic pain (e.g. back or feet) or symptoms such as tiredness and low motivation. On the other hand excessive exercise can be used as an inappropriate coping strategy. People are encouraged to seek advice from their GP before beginning any exercise program.

**Q** *How can /does your service support and motivate people to include physical activity in their daily lives?*



**Figure 2.** Percentage of people living with a psychotic illness experiencing chronic conditions <sup>10</sup>

## PHYSICAL HEALTH RESOURCES

- The Mental Health Coordinating Council - Physical Health information and useful web-links.  
<http://www.mhcc.org.au/sector-development/recovery-and-practice-approaches/physical-health.aspx>
- Mental Health and Drug & Alcohol Office, NSW Health - The linking physical health and mental health... it makes sense, initiative.  
[http://www.cadre.com.au/nsw\\_health/](http://www.cadre.com.au/nsw_health/)
- NSW Cancer Council, Tackling Tobacco Program: Action on Smoking and Disadvantage  
<http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/1384/reduce-risks/smoking-reduce-risks/tackling-tobacco/tackling-tobacco-goals-and-target-groups/>
- New Moves Healthy Lifestyle Program  
<http://www.sfnsw.org.au/Physical-Health>
- Mental Health Sports Network (MHSN)  
<https://www.sfnsw.org.au/MHSN/Home#.Us9-cp6SwrU>
- SANE - Australia Healthy Living Guidelines for NGOs to integrate physical health in a systemic way into service development and delivery.  
<http://www.sane.org/sane-projects/1032-healthy-living-guidelines>
- SANE - Good-practice Smokefree Guidelines for NGOs  
<http://www.sane.org/projects/mind-body/989-sane-smokefree-guidelines-for-ngos->
- Fitness Australia - Lift for Life: Resistance training program designed for adults with (or at risk of developing) type 2 diabetes and other chronic conditions.  
[www.liftforlife.com.au](http://www.liftforlife.com.au)
- Exercise & Sports Science Australia (ESSA): Adult Pre-Exercise Screening System (APSS)  
<http://www.essa.org.au/for-gps/adult-pre-exercise-screening-system/>
- YMCA - Brightside: Mental health and wellbeing exercise program.  
[www.ymcansw.org.au/brightside](http://www.ymcansw.org.au/brightside)

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- 5 SANE Australia, *Mental Illness And Physical Health: The Facts*. [Accessed 1/7/2013]. Available: <http://www.sane.org/sane-information/informationfactsheets/1084-mental-illness-and-physical-health-the-facts>
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