



DATI ALLA MANO

I PODCAST

## LIFESTYLES, FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

From the post-war period to today, generations that succeeded one another experienced very different life conditions compared to those that preceded them. For example, they have enjoyed significantly better hygiene and health conditions, and then, from the 1970s, a more extensive access to health services thanks to the introduction of the National Health Service, a greater number of young people were able to get an education – I remind our listeners that education in 1948 became public, free, and compulsory. And since greater education entails also a better awareness regarding risky behaviours and health protection, I wonder: how have habits and, more generally, the lifestyles of those living in Italy changed?

I am Cristiana Conti and this is Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast by Istat, the National Institute of Statistics where I work in the Directorate for Communication, Information and Services to Citizens and Users. This initiative is part of a public communication project. In this episode, we will explore the lifestyles of yesterday and today, comparing the same age groups that have succeeded one another over the years.

How can we compare generations and, in particular, the lifestyles they adopted? At Istat, we have several strong points. I will present two of them: since the 1980s, the survey on Health Conditions and Use of Health Services, and since 1993, the Multi-purpose Survey on Aspects of Daily Life. These are two important sources that help us understand how we are changing and what paths - also of awareness- we are taking. So, having this in mind, what are the lifestyles of people of the same age but who have lived in different times? I asked Romina Fraboni, who was deputy coordinator of the 2025 edition of the Istat Annual Report which addresses, among other things, this topic.

Cristiana. Hello Romina, welcome.

Romina. Thank you, and greetings to our listeners.

C. People's habits have changed over time; I'm thinking, for example, of smoking – once it was difficult to see a film without at least one smoker, a sign that smoking was a behaviour that could be depicted – today it is no longer like that, awareness of health risks is widespread and the number of smokers is decreasing, isn't it?

R. Definitely yes. Consider that more than 60% of young men aged 30-34 born after the Second World War smoked. At the same age, among those born in the '90s – therefore 30-34 years old –, the percentage of smokers drops to 33.4%.

C. Almost halved. And what about women?

R. Overall, the proportion of women smokers has always been lower than that of male smokers, but for women too there has been a decrease over the generations although at a slower and irregular rate. There was a peak among women in their thirties born in the 1950s but today – that is, among women in their thirties born in the 1990s – less than 20% smoke.

C. These seem like good news to me.

R. True. However, today there is also another phenomenon to be taken into account.

C. Which one?

R. Electronic cigarettes and various heated tobacco products. More than 14% of young people aged 18 to 34 use them. And often their use is associated with that of regular cigarettes.

C. And this is not good news. Other risky behaviours?

R. The consumption of alcoholic beverages, for example. Over time, the type of alcohol consumption has changed dramatically.

C. That is to say?

R. For those born immediately after the war we are talking about daily but moderate use - that is wine drunk with meals – but this habit is in sharp decline.

C. So people no longer drink with meals?

R. It is a habit less and less in use from generation to generation, while instead the occasional consumption of alcohol has increased, for example at weekends, outside of meals, sometimes in high quantities - and we are talking not only about wine but also beer and spirits.

C. Have we moved closer to the Nordic countries' style?

R. In fact, yes.

C. And the phenomenon of *binge drinking*, that is, drinking until losing self-control, until getting drunk?

R. In the last twenty years it has remained more or less stable. More in detail, in 2023 it concerned 7.8% of the population, with a peak in the 20- 24 age group. However, in this area we have also noticed changes over time, consider that *binge drinking* concerned 9.0% of 35-39 age group born in the early 70s, while among peers born fifteen years later, in 1985-89, the percentage exceeds 15%.

C. A change that makes you think. Let's move on to good habits. What can you tell me about sports activities?

R. I can tell you that in the last thirty years, more and more people have started to dedicate part of their free time to physical and sports activities. Consider that from 1995 to 2023 the proportion of the population aged 10 years or more who does sports has continuously risen from 16.6% to 27.6%.

C. Quite a leap!

R: Yes, each generation is more active than the previous one. Let's take those between 45 and 49 years old: among those born in the post-war period, only 18% did any sport (occasionally or continuously), whereas among their peers born in the second half of the 70s this percentage increases to almost 40%. And this trend is visible across all age groups.

C: Does this also apply to young people?

R: The most active are young people born from the second half of the 1980s onwards. If we look at the very young, the change is even more evident. Among children aged 10-14, today two out of three play sports.

C: And if we look at the less young?

R: It is true that with age people tend to move less, but even among older adults the habit of sports activities is growing. Let's take the 60-64 age group: 18% of those born in the post-war

period played sport, whereas among the 60-64 year olds of today, or those born in the early 60s, the proportion exceeds 30%.

C. Not bad!

R. There is more. Sports activities are growing even among 65-69 year olds: 17.5% of those born after the war did them, while today the number is almost 28%.

C: Are there differences between men and women?

R: Still yes, but the gap is narrowing, especially among the youngest. Less than half of the girls born in the early 80s played sport between 10 and 14 years old, those born ten years later were more than 60%.

C: However, despite everything, we are still among the less active European countries...

R: Unfortunately, yes. And this is a problem because a sedentary lifestyle is a health risk factor. Even today, more than a third of the population does not do any physical activity.

C: Not even a walk?

R: If we are talking about those who do light physical activity, such as walking at least a couple of kilometres, swimming, or cycling, between 1995 and 2023 the percentage actually decreased from 36% to 28.4%.

C: And are there territorial differences?

R: Yes, even though the South which was lagging behind is catching up. However, for example, among the very young born between 2000-2004, three out of four in the Centre-North play sport and only two out of four in the South.

C. Talking about physical activity reminds me of another pillar of healthy living identified by the World Health Organisation: diet. Have eating habits changed over time? And if so, how?

R. I can tell you that over time the habit of eating an adequate breakfast has increased.

C. Okay, but what do you mean by an adequate breakfast? Because many different types of breakfast come to mind... from the classic, Roman, cappuccino and croissant onwards...

R. Of course, but for statistical purposes an adequate breakfast consists of drinking milk and/or eating something. And I can confirm that it's a habit that spread after the war and stabilised among generations born from 1970 onwards. In 2024, it concerns 80.1% of the population aged 10 and over, while thirty years earlier it was around 68%.

C. This trend is good news.

R. Less good, however, is another trend, that of fruit and vegetable consumption.

C. The foundations of the famous Mediterranean diet. What is happening?

R: Regarding the consumption of at least four portions a day of fruit, vegetables, and produce - excluding potatoes – we have observed a decrease in the last thirty years: in 1994, it concerned 94% of the population aged at least ten, in 2024 it has dropped to 78.2 %.

C And how does the comparison across different age groups look?

R: The decline is more pronounced among young people aged 15 and over. For the same age, more recent generations show less healthy eating habits: if we compare the habits of 30-34 year olds born in the early 1960s and those born 15 years later, the consumption of fruit, vegetables, and greens has fallen by more than 10%.

C. Any gender differences?

R. The decline affects everyone, although women maintain a higher consumption.

C. And from diet, I would move on to a strongly related topic: body weight, what do the scales tell us?

R. They tell us that in 40 years, obesity has spread. To be clear, in the early 1980s, it affected 7.4% of people aged 18 and over; in 2024, it affects 11.8%. And the increase particularly concerns men.

C. And let's remember that the WHO has classified obesity as a genuine pathology.

R. Yes, also because it increases the cardio-vascular risk, the risk of type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer.

C. We are talking about obesity, not excess weight, right?

R. Right, but also regarding excess weight, we have observed that it is increasing from generation to generation, especially among young people.

C. Can you give us some figures?

R. Those aged 20-24 born at the beginning of the 2000s show rates of excess weight significantly higher than their peers from previous generations: we are talking about 21.6% compared to the 13.4% of those born in the early 1960s.

C. So, young people, please pay attention to your diet and physical activity, right?

R. Right.

C. I was reading, among other things, specifically in the Istat Annual Report, that obesity entails social costs, did I understand correctly?

R. Certainly, a greater pressure on healthcare services and, economically, also a loss of productivity. The reduction of these costs is part of the objectives for sustainable development - the SDGs- set by the United Nations for 2030, because not only malnutrition but also overnutrition is detrimental to people's well-being.

C. Certainly. And let's turn to health in general. We are living longer and longer.

R. Yes, since the post-war period life expectancy has continued to gain years, apart from the reversal of trend due to the pandemic. Furthermore, in the last 30 years, the onset of serious health problems has also shifted forward, I mean for example, chronic diseases, functional limitations ... also in terms of perceived health, it has been 15 years that we have observed an improvement in the perception of those over 55.

C. And what about young people?

R. In this regard we have less positive news. Even though young people generally have the highest percentages of good health, we have observed a decline.

C. What kind of decline?

R. I'll give you an example: among the young people aged 30-34 born in the second half of the 1970s and those born twenty years later, we observed a 5% loss concerning the perception of good health. And the decline is more pronounced among women, associated, among other things, with the deterioration in terms of mental health.

C. Data that deserves consideration. Thank you, Romina, for being with us.

R. Goodbye and see you next time.

## **Conclusions**

The comparison between the lifestyles of generations reveals highs and lows, especially concerning young people who, on one hand, show greater awareness of habits harmful to health, such as smoking, and on the other hand are losing healthy habits such as the daily consumption of fruit, vegetables, and greens, while excess weight is increasing. Sports participation is increasing, but the perception of health worsens. In general, things are better for older adults, who are gaining years of life and are more active today than yesterday.

I am Cristiana Conti, and this was Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast from the National Institute of Statistics. This episode was produced with the support of Storielibere.fm.

Continue to follow us on the Dati alla mano (Data at Hand) section of Istat.it and on your favourite listening app. Are there any topics you would like to explore further? Write to me at [datiallamano@istat.it](mailto:datiallamano@istat.it).

Romina Fraboni, Sara Maulo, Manuela Bartolotta, Emanuela Bologna, Laura Iannucci and Lidia Gargiulo worked on this episode.