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A German health survey found that fear of serious illness rose again in 2026

Cancer remained the top concern, and more respondents said they exercise regularly, eat healthily, get vaccinated and drink little alcohol

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Fear of serious illnesses in Germany rose again in 2026 after easing slightly a year earlier, according to an annual survey by the Forsa polling institute for DAK-Gesundheit, which also found that more people said they were taking preventive steps in daily life, including limiting alcohol.

DAK-Gesundheit released the results in Hamburg on Monday, November 23. The insurer said the findings point to rising concern about cancer, dementia, stroke and heart attack at the same time that many people report paying closer attention to diet, exercise, vaccination and screening.

Cancer remained the illness people feared most. In the survey, 70% of respondents said they were most afraid of developing a tumor, up from 69% a year earlier. DAK-Gesundheit said concern increased across all illnesses measured in the poll. Two categories reached their highest level since the survey began in 2010: 57% said they feared Alzheimer’s disease or dementia, up from 54%, and 39% said they feared mental illness, up from 31%.

Concern also rose sharply for stroke, climbing from 45% to 51%, and for heart attack, increasing from 39% to 43%. Fear of a serious accident with major injuries rose to 49% from 46%, while concern about severe eye disease leading to blindness increased to 39% from 34%. The survey allowed multiple responses, so totals do not add up to 100%.

Alongside those worries, respondents reported higher levels of preventive behavior. DAK-Gesundheit said 85% said they exercise regularly to prevent illness. Another 83% said they pay attention to a healthy diet, up from 78%. Vaccination also increased, with 82% saying they get vaccinated, a gain of 6 percentage points.

The survey also found that 81% said they drink only a little alcohol, while 76% said they do not smoke. Another 79% said they keep mentally fit through reading or other intellectual challenges. DAK-Gesundheit said the figures for diet, alcohol, non-smoking and mental fitness were the highest recorded since 2010.

That alcohol result could matter for brewers, winemakers, spirits producers and hospitality operators because it could affect product mixes or menu planning. But the poll records self-reported claims of drinking only a little alcohol, not quantities, frequency, purchases or sales, so it does not by itself show a market trend or a drop in alcohol consumption.

Use of screening and prevention services also remained widespread. According to the survey, 62% said they go for cancer screening, 46% use health checks for cardiovascular disease and 42% do relaxation exercises to reduce stress. Women reported stronger health-focused behavior than men overall. DAK-Gesundheit said 87% of women said they eat consciously, compared with 79% of men, and 73% of women said they go for cancer screening, compared with 52% of men. Among men, the share going for cancer screening still rose by 3 percentage points from the prior year.

Mental illness stood out especially among younger people. Among respondents ages 14 to 29, 61% said they feared mental illness such as depression or burnout, up 14 percentage points from the prior year. That was far above the rate for the full sample and well above the 20% recorded among people age 60 and older.

Despite the increase in disease-related fears, most respondents still rated their own health positively. The survey found that 37% described their health as very good and 48% as rather good. Younger people were especially upbeat: 63% of those ages 14 to 29 said their health was very good, compared with 24% of respondents over age 60.

Andreas Storm, the chief executive of DAK-Gesundheit, said the rise in concern should be read as a signal for the health care system. He said the debate over reforms should focus on rebuilding trust so that people feel confident they will receive good care if they become seriously ill, while prevention and health literacy should also be expanded.

DAK-Gesundheit said the survey has been conducted annually since 2010. Forsa interviewed 1,007 women and men age 14 and older across Germany from November 4 to November 6.