

# Playing music and singing linked to healthier life ? but only if you're a woman

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Male musicians are likely to be overweight and smoke daily, including cannabis.

Women who play a musical instrument or sing daily tend to smoke and drink less than others. They also eat more fruit and vegetables and have more active hobbies.

In other words, they are healthy.

These are the findings of a new research project from Aalborg University and the National Institute of Public Health, Denmark.

A total of 14,265 Danes took part in the survey, answering questions on welfare, healthy habits, and musical hobbies.

The results are presented in a number of research articles and show that female musicians who sing or play an instrument every day have a 25 per cent lower risk of poor health than non-musicians.

These results, which are [published in the Scandinavian Journal of Public Health](#) [7], did not come as a big surprise to Lars Ole Bonde, one of the two scientists behind the project.

“Without doubt this has something to do with musical style and genre,” says Bonde, a professor in music therapy at the Department of Communication and Psychology at Aalborg University, Denmark.

“Many of the female musicians in the study are probably choral singers and we know from other research studies that many women join choirs as part of a healthy life style – even if the music is the most important thing for them. Musically active men tend to play in bands and their health profile is rather different,” he says.

*Read More: [Song and music helps patients with dementia](#)[8]*

## Male musicians lag behind

Male musicians tend to smoke daily, including cannabis. Moreover, they are 40 per cent more likely to be overweight than men who do not play a musical instrument.

The research project does not try to explain these trends—it only demonstrates a correlation and not a cause and effect.

But other studies may offer some clues.

“We [know](#) [9]that professional musicians, who cultivate certain rhythmic genres such as heavy metal, hip

hop, rap and some types of jazz, tend to die earlier than others. They have a terrible health profile and typically high alcohol and drugs consumption, such as cannabis. In other words, being in a rock band versus a classical choir is associated with big differences in behavioural patterns and life style,” says Bonde.

“This also affects women in the rhythmic music world. Take for example Amy Winehouse, who had a big substance abuse problem and died far too young,” he says.

*Read More: [Mathematician will regulate your emotions with music](#)[10]*

### **Professional musicians are less healthy than others**

Another explanation for the difference between the sexes could be the predominance of men in the music industry.

Professional musicians are far more likely to live unhealthy lives than other professions, according to another study from the project, published in the Nordic Journal of Music Therapy.

The results show that professional musicians are:

- twice as likely to go on a drinking binge.
- 2.5 times more likely to smoke cannabis.
- 25 per cent more likely to smoke tobacco daily.
- 25 per cent less likely to eat fruit throughout the day.

And this only applies to professional musicians. The results show that amateurs, who also play daily, are healthier. They eat more fruit, drink less alcohol, and smoke tobacco less often.

“It reveals an interesting difference between professional and amateur musicians,” writes Professor Emeritus Töres Theorell from the Stress Research Institute at Stockholm University, Sweden, in an email to ScienceNordic’s sister site, Videnskab.dk.

Theorell studies music activity in relations to lifestyle and health, and was not involved in the new research.

*Read More: [Music can relieve chronic pain](#)[11]*

### **The problem could be bigger than the results suggest**

According to Theorell, the unhealthy habits among professional musicians might be even worse than these studies suggest.

“A relatively high number of people [survey response rate was 57 per cent] chose not to take part and it could well be that the differences between professional musicians and others would have been even bigger if they had taken part. Some professional musicians could have held back from participating just because they are not doing so well,” writes Theorell.

“My experience from having studied musicians tells me that they are particularly sensitive in these situations,” he adds.

*Read More: [Do you have composer genes?](#)[12]*

### **Professional musicians are satisfied with life**

Even though professional musicians seem relatively unhealthy, they nonetheless reported a much higher degree of satisfaction with their lives and good mental health than the participants (amateurs musicians and non-musicians).

It is these contradictory results that are most surprising to Bonde.

“Even though professional musicians and previous professional musicians have poorer health habits and report many health problems, like pain or stress, they nonetheless report high satisfaction with their health,” he says.

“It points towards the positive power of filling your life with making music and how much quality of life can be gained from a musically active life. I am not sure we can find anything similar in other art forms,” says Bonde.

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 [Professional musicians are often less healthy than the average, while amateur musicians are often healthier. \(Photo: Shutterstock\)](#) [15]

 [Despite poor health, musical pros are pretty happy with their lot. \(Photo: Shutterstock\)](#) [16]

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["Associations between daily musicking and health: Results from a nationwide survey in Denmark" \(2016\)](#) [7]

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Catherine Jex

February 2, 2018 - 07:31

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