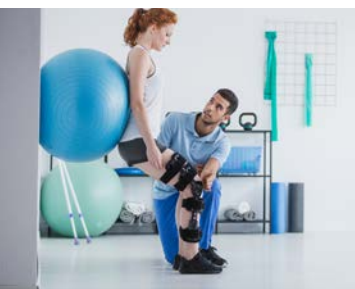




# 2020 ARBOBALANS

Quality of work, outcomes and measures in the Netherlands

## SUMMARY



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## SUMMARY

The 'Arbobalans' report provides an overview of the working conditions and work-related health of workers, as well as of the occupational health and safety policies of companies in the Netherlands, based on recent figures from monitors and studies. The report is divided into four chapters:

- Key figures
- Sickness absenteeism
- Occupational accidents
- Occupational diseases

The data relate primarily to 2019, thus providing an overview of the state of the workforce in the Netherlands before the COVID-19 pandemic, to which the consequences of this crisis can be compared.

The most important sources, definitions and methods of analysis are discussed in Chapter 1.

### CHAPTER 2: KEY FIGURES

#### *Stagnated growth of the flexible layer of companies*

In 2019, the working population consisted of 7.5 million employees, 1.1 million self-employed people without personnel (freelancers) and 340 thousand self-employed people with personnel. The percentage of employees with flexible employment relationships has seen little if any growth since the previous Arbobalans report. This might have been due to economic prosperity, as a result of which many employees have received permanent employment relationships.

#### *Indicators of the quality of work have remained stable, but there has been an increase in work that is not bound to a specific time or place, as well as in working from home*

The physical and environmental strain on employees and freelancers remained reasonably stable between 2014 and 2019. For example, more than 40% reported that they regularly experience one or more physically demanding risks in their work (e.g., applying force, being exposed to vibration stress, working in an uncomfortable posture and/or performing repetitive movements). We have observed a slight increase in working with computer screens (including for prolonged periods) and a

slight decrease in physical strain amongst employees with temporary employment relationships. We have also observed a slight increase of exposure to hazardous substances and/or infectious people amongst freelancers and temporary agency workers.

Psychological workload also remained stable between 2014 and 2019. About 18% of all employees and 4% of all freelancers reported experiencing both high psychological task demands and low autonomy. Emotional strain has increased slightly, from 9.5% in 2014 to 10.8% in 2019. It is further interesting to note a sudden increase in inappropriate conduct – by colleagues, supervisors or third parties – between 2018 and 2019. The most likely explanation for this increase at this time is of a methodological nature. Subsequent measurements will be needed in order to determine whether there has actually been an increase in inappropriate conduct or whether this effect was caused by the elimination of a question.

The only trend that we could observe is that work that is not bound to any specific time or place became clearly more popular during the period from 2014 through 2019. The percentage of employees working from home increased from 33% in 2014 to nearly 37% in 2019. The increase in the average number of hours spent working from home was limited (0.2 hours/week). More employees reported regularly working outside of the employer's premises. This percentage increased from 15% in 2014 to 18% in 2019. Employees are also increasingly determining their own working hours. During the same period, this figure rose from 23% to 27%.

*Quality of work was highest for employees with a permanent employment relationship and for freelancers*

Of all working people, freelancers and employees with permanent employment relationships had the most favourable working conditions. Freelancers had approximately the same level of physical and environmental strain as employees with permanent contracts, but they experienced much less psychosocial strain. Upon examining the exposure of employees without permanent employment relationships to occupational risks, we must conclude that temporary agency workers had particularly unfavourable scores for physical strain, environmental strain (with increasing exposure to hazardous substances), psychological workload and internal inappropriate conduct (by colleagues or supervisors). This group was followed closely by on-call and supply workers, who had the most unfavourable scores for external inappropriate conduct (by third parties, like customers, students, patients

and passengers), while they were at less risk than temporary agency workers for all of the other risks. In this regard, it is important to note that, on average, employees without permanent employment relationships worked fewer hours, such that they experienced less exposure to occupational risks and were thus less likely to experience the negative consequences of such risks. This was particularly true for on-call and supply workers.

*Clear division between white-collar and blue-collar workers, and a high level of violence and harassment in occupations relating to healthcare and social work*

The working conditions of employees and freelancers reflect a clear division between white-collar and blue-collar occupations. Blue-collar occupations were more likely to involve physically demanding work and environmental strain.

Physical strain was most common for occupational groups in the construction, manufacturing and agricultural sectors, and environmental strain was most common amongst metalworkers, machinery mechanics and construction workers. Employees in white-collar occupations were more likely to encounter heavy psychological workload and emotional strain. This was particularly evident amongst teachers and healthcare employees. Work that is not bound to any specific time or place was the least common in the blue-collar occupations. In contrast, such working arrangements were especially common for managers.

External violence and harassment occurred particularly often in healthcare and social-work occupations, as compared to other occupations. Employees were much more likely to encounter such situations than were freelancers in the same types of occupations. Very little difference was observed between types of occupations with regard to internal violence and harassment.

*Slight decrease in the overall health of employees and freelancers*

The overall health of employees and freelancers had declined slightly in 2019, relative to 2014. More specifically, in 2014, more than 82% of all employees reported their health as being good or very good, as compared to more than 79% in 2019. For freelancers, this decreased from nearly 85% to nearly 83%. This decrease was accompanied by a gradual increase in burnout complaints during the same period. In the past year (2018–2019), however, these complaints did not exhibit any further increase. Nevertheless, 17% of all employees reported having experienced a large amount of burnout complaints in 2019. Freelancers

enjoyed better health than employees and, in addition to better health, they reported especially fewer burnout complaints (only slightly more than 8% of all freelancers reported experiencing a large amount of burnout complaints). Again in 2019, the groups of employees who were most likely to have experienced a large amount of burnout complaints were temporary agency workers (more than 22%) and employees with permanent employment (more than 18%).

Nearly 37% of all employees reported having chronic conditions. Nearly one in five indicated that these conditions had limited them in their work. The greatest share of chronic conditions related to the musculoskeletal system, with back problems being most common (8%), followed by problems with the legs or feet (6%) and problems with the neck, shoulders, arms or hands (5.8%). More than half of all employees reported being limited in performing their work due to these chronic conditions. Around 10% reported being strongly limited.

Partly in response to legislation, the average retirement age continued its gradual rise throughout the period from 2014 through 2019. In 2019, the average retirement age even exceeded 65 years (65 years and 1 month). In 2019, the average retirement age even exceeded 65 years (65 years and 1 month). At the same time, however, the average age until which employees indicated that they were able and willing to continue working actually decreased slightly between 2014/2015 and 2019 (to 62.5 years). As a result, in 2019, the average retirement age and the ability and willingness to continue working longer diverged even further from each other.

*More companies meeting the obligations of the Working Conditions Act and being more active in work-related risk management*

The percentage of organisations meeting the investigated legal obligations of the Working Conditions Act in 2019 had increased somewhat relative to 2014. For example, 52% of all companies said that they had performed a risk assessment in 2019 (as compared to 46% in 2014), approximately 27% of all companies had not yet appointed a Prevention Officer (as compared to 36% in 2014), and more companies had arranged to meet the obligation to be able to call in the services of an occupational health physician or an occupational health and safety service provider (73.8% in 2014 and 79.7% in 2019).

In general, larger companies were more likely to have arranged to meet their occupational health and safety obligations. For example, more than 93% of all companies with 250 or more employees performed a risk assessment, as compared to 40% of all companies with 2–9 employees. In 2019, companies were also more likely to report that they had taken certain new measures aimed at work-related risk management than in 2014. These measures were in such areas as personal protective equipment, task adjustments, technical improvements and organisational changes. The larger companies were also more likely to have taken these types of measures. In addition, companies that had performed a risk assessment were also more likely to have taken new measures in the past two years. The latter effect could be observed in all size categories, and it was thus independent of company size.

*Psychological workload still seen by many employers as an important risk; employees identify the greatest need for measures to address psychological workload and work-related stress*

Many employers (55% in 2019) regarded psychological workload and work-related stress as important occupational risks, often mentioning them in combination with new measures that had been taken in the past two years. Employers indicated that they had taken relatively general measures to address psychological workload and work-related stress, like ‘giving them more autonomy’ and ‘opening the issue to discussion in performance reviews or work consultations’. Nevertheless, in 2019, employees still most frequently mentioned ‘addressing psychological workload and work-related stress’ when asked whether they felt a need for measures or supplements to what was already being done in the companies.

*Increase in the percentage of European companies having performed a risk assessment; Dutch companies score average for Europe*

The preliminary results of the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) amongst European companies confirm the slight increase in the percentage of companies in the Netherlands which have performed a risk assessment. At the same time, the results demonstrate that the performance of Dutch companies in this regard was quite average. There appears to be room for improvement on this point. In Europe, the respondents to the ESENER identified ‘repetitive hand or arm movements’ as the most commonly occurring occupational risk. Time pressure was the most commonly occurring occupational risk in a few countries: Finland, Sweden and Denmark. In the Dutch companies, time pressure was the second most commonly occurring risk. In many countries,

‘interactions with difficult patients, customers or students’ were identified as the most commonly occurring psychosocial risk. Of the companies in Europe reporting the presence of psychosocial risks, one in five found it more difficult to address this problem than to address other occupational risks.

### CHAPTER 3: SICKNESS ABSENTEEISM AND OCCUPATIONAL DISABILITY

*Sickness absenteeism is increasing and differs by sector, occupational group and company size*

The average sickness absenteeism in 2019 was 4.5%. This means that, each year, employees were absent for an average of 4.5 of the 100 working days. In 2019, 47% of all employees had been absent from work at least once.

On average, in 2019, all employees (including those with no sickness absenteeism) were absent from work 1.2 times per year. The average number of working days absent was 7.8. Increases can be observed on all of these indicators, in comparison to previous years. The percentage of employees with long-term absenteeism was also higher than in previous years.

In sectors with high levels of physically and/or mentally demanding work, the percentage of absenteeism was higher than average. This was particularly true for healthcare (6.0%), public administration (5.4%) and transport (5.2%). Relatively high levels of absenteeism were observed in the following occupational groups: bus drivers, train drivers and seafarers (7.4%); nurses and care assistants (7.3%); tailors, suit makers and upholsterers (6.8%); plumbers, pipefitters, welders and sheet-metal and construction workers (5.8%); and police personnel, firefighters and security guards (5.5%). Another interesting finding is that the absenteeism percentage increased with company size. The largest companies (with 250 or more employees) reported average absenteeism of 5.3%, while the smallest locations (fewer than 5 employees) reported 2.8%.

For one fourth of the employees who were absent from work due to sickness in 2019, an absence check had been performed during their most recent absence. The likelihood that an absence check will be performed depends strongly on the length of the absence. Of all employees with short-term absenteeism (up to and including one working week), absence checks had been performed for 13%.

Amongst employees with medium-term absenteeism (absence for between one and six working weeks), absence checks were performed for an average of two in five (39%). This was the case for four in five (80%) employees with long-term absenteeism (longer than six working weeks).

*Differences in sickness absenteeism according to type of employment relationship*

The rate of sickness absenteeism for employees with permanent contracts was higher than for on-call/supply workers, temporary agency employees and employees with a temporary contract. The absenteeism rate for freelancers fell between these two extremes. For freelancers, there was little difference in absenteeism between the ‘new’ freelancers (who sell their own labour) and the ‘classic’ freelancers (who sell products).

*The absenteeism percentage was relatively high for women, older employees, employees with lower levels of education and employees with chronic or long-term conditions*

The higher absenteeism rate—particularly for older employees, as well as for women and people with lower levels of education—was associated with the greater likelihood of these groups to have health problems. Moreover, employees with low levels of education are more likely to perform their jobs under relatively heavily demanding working conditions. In addition, the average absenteeism rate was higher for employees in one-person or single-parent households and for female employees who have children with their partners. The absenteeism rate of employees of migrant background was somewhat lower than that of employees of Dutch background.

*Work-related reasons accounted for more than one fourth of all absenteeism*

Of all employees with absences from work in 2019, 26% reported that the complaint leading to the most recent episode of absenteeism was either partially or primarily related to work. Absenteeism days that were either partially or primarily related to work accounted for 47% of all absenteeism days. This was the highest percentage in the past six years. More than half of all absenteeism days in the Netherlands (either work-related or non-work-related) were associated with either mental health problems, emotional exhaustion or burnout (27%) or with complaints involving the musculoskeletal system (24%).

Psychosocial workload (PSA) played a role in the most recent absence in 27% of all work-related or non-work-related absenteeism days. Physical workload played a role in the most recent absence in 11% of the total number of absenteeism days. Certain taxing working conditions were associated with high average absenteeism percentages. These conditions included frequent (or very frequent) bullying by supervisors or colleagues (average rate of sickness absenteeism: 14.5%) and frequent (or very frequent) intimidation by supervisors or colleagues (14.2%).

#### *Large differences in recovery time for different health complaints*

Approximately 16% of all absenteeism episodes lasted only one working day. About three in five (59%) employees were back at work after a maximum of four working days of absenteeism, nearly four in five (78%) were back at work within two working weeks, and 86% were back at work within four working weeks. The recovery percentage increased to 97% after six months, and to 99% after one year. Employees recovered most quickly from headache, flu and colds, as well as from abdominal, stomach or intestinal complaints.

More than 95% of all employees had recovered from the first two groups of complaints within one or two weeks, with 89% recovering within the same period from abdominal, stomach or intestinal complaints. Slower recoveries were observed for 'mental health problems, emotional exhaustion and burnout', as well as for cardiac and vascular complaints. After one year, 4.5% of all employees with the first group of health complaints and 3.2% of all employees with the second group of health complaints had not yet made a full return to work.

#### *Costs of work-related absenteeism amounted to €6 billion*

The estimated costs of continued payment of wages to employees who are absent amounted to more than €13 billion per year, with €6 billion due to work-related absenteeism. Given the long average length of absenteeism due to psychosocial workload (PSA), 64% of all work-related absenteeism costs could be attributed to PSA. Physical workload (e.g., heavy work or prolonged periods of performing the same actions) led to 20% of all absenteeism costs.

#### *Developments in intake under the Work and Income (according to labour capacity) Act*

In 2019, the intake under the Work and Income (according to labour capacity) Act (WIA) was approximately 45 thousand people, 33 thousand of whom received benefit payments under the Return to Work (Partially Disabled Persons)

Regulations (WGA) and around 12 thousand of whom received benefit payments under the Income Provision for Completely Disabled Persons (IVA). Since 2014, there has been an absolute increase in intake under the WIA. In 2019, it had increased by 3.6% relative to 2018 (after correcting for advance payments). This increase was especially observable for the WGA. There was hardly any increase for the IVA. According to the National Employee Insurance Agency (UWV), this increase was primarily due to growth in the number of employees in response to economic development and an increase in the intake of people 60 years of age and older, due to the increase in the retirement age. For years, mental health conditions have constituted the most important diagnostic category. In 2019, they accounted for one third of WIA inflow.

## CHAPTER 4: OCCUPATIONAL ACCIDENTS

#### *Percentage of occupational accidents remained reasonably stable*

In 2019, 245 thousand employees had accidents during the course of their work. This amounts to 3.3% of all employees between the ages of 15 and 75 years. In recent years, the percentage of employees having occupational accidents fluctuated between 3.0% and 3.4%. Of the total number of employees having accidents during the course of their work in 2019, 114 thousand were absent from work for at least one day as a result of the accident. This amounts to 1.5% of all employees. This percentage has remained virtually the same since 2015. For 84 thousand employees, the accidents resulted in longer-term absenteeism in 2019. More specifically, these employees stayed home four days or longer as a result of accidents during the course of their work. This corresponds to 1.1% of all employees in 2019. This percentage has also remained quite stable through the years. Compared to the number of employees, there were 0.6 fatal occupational accidents per 100 thousand employees in 2018. This indicator has remained virtually constant since 2012.

#### *The Netherlands scored better than average for Europe in terms of occupational accidents*

In order to compare occupational accident figures from the Netherlands to those of other European countries, they have been standardised (i.e., corrected for differences in national economic structures). In the European member states in

2018, there were 1,620 serious occupational accidents leading to four or more days of sickness absenteeism per 100 thousand employees (standardised).

With 1,430 accidents leading to four or more days of sickness absenteeism per 100 thousand employees (standardised), the Netherlands was below the average for the EU. Unlike other countries, the Netherlands also counts occupational accidents involving only mental harm. Not taking these types of accidents into account, the figures for the Netherlands would be even lower.

In 2018, the standardised number of fatal occupational accidents per 100 thousand employees in the Netherlands was the lowest in Europe. In that year, an average of 2.1 fatal accidents per 100 thousand employees occurred within the EU, as compared to 0.8 in the Netherlands.

#### *Groups with a relatively large number of occupational accidents leading to absenteeism*

For employees, various background characteristics, characteristics relating to the work and the company, and work-related characteristics are associated with occupational accidents leading to absenteeism. For example, men are more likely than women are to have accidents during their work that result in absenteeism. This also applies to people who have completed only primary or secondary education, as compared to those with higher levels of education, and to employees of non-Western migration background, relative to employees without a background of migration. With regard to the characteristics of the work and the companies within which employees are working, these types of accidents were most common amongst employees in the transport, construction and hospitality sectors. The occupational group with the most occupational accidents leading to absenteeism consisted of police and firefighters (5.5%), followed closely by cooks (5.3%). The percentage of occupational accidents leading to absenteeism increased with the number of regular and overtime hours worked by employees. It was also clearly associated with working outside of office hours—in other words, with shift work and with working evenings, nights, Saturdays and Sundays. Occupational accidents leading to absenteeism were more common for temporary agency employees than they were for those with other types of employment relationships. Finally, several work-related characteristics were associated with the likelihood of occupational accidents leading to absenteeism. This was particularly the case for employees performing hazardous work, perceiving a lack of social support, working with

hazardous substances, encountering violence and harassment or performing emotionally demanding work.

#### *Factors closely associated with having an occupational accident leading to absenteeism*

Results of multivariate analysis correcting for the influence of other factors indicate that having an occupational accident was most strongly associated with a number of work-related characteristics. These characteristics included performing hazardous or physically demanding work and experiencing internal inappropriate conduct at work (by colleagues or supervisors). Employees who performed emotionally demanding work, who were dissatisfied about their work or who had experienced external inappropriate conduct at work (by third parties) were 1.5 times more likely to have an occupational accident than were employees to whom these characteristics did not apply. Other work-related characteristics that were associated with having occupational accidents included the lack of social support and autonomy, working with hazardous substances and the level of difficulty of the work. This did not apply to a heavy psychological workload.

Men were more likely than women were to have occupational accidents leading to absenteeism, after correction, and people older than 55 years were at greater risk of occupational accidents, while those with higher levels of education were at less risk. After correcting for other relevant characteristics, migration background was not associated with having an occupational accident. This was also not the case for several characteristics of the work and the company: type of employment relationship, having multiple jobs and the length of time worked for a company. In contrast to the findings based on the univariate analysis, the multivariate analysis did not identify any sectors with an increased likelihood of occupational accidents. The likelihood of occupational accidents was relatively lower in the information and communication sector than it was in the trade sector. In addition, employees in micro companies (up to 10 employees) and in medium-sized companies (50–249 employees) were more likely to have occupational accidents than were employees in large companies (250 or more employees). In terms of working hours, employees working in jobs for fewer than 20 hours per week were less likely to have occupational accidents than were employees working full-time. Finally, there was an association between having an occupational accident and working nights and Saturdays.



When developing preventive policy, it is important to examine group-level characteristics that are associated with occupational accidents. The three work-related characteristics that were most strongly associated with occupational accidents leading to absenteeism were as follows: physically demanding work, hazardous work and internal inappropriate conduct.

#### *Causes and consequences of occupational accidents leading to absenteeism*

One in five (20%) employees who missed at least one day of work in 2019 due to an accident at work identified psychological strain as the most important cause of the most recent accident.

The second and third causes identified by employees were slipping, tripping or other type of fall (14%) and physical strain (13%). Slipping, tripping or other type of fall were the most important causes of the most recent accident for freelancers. The consequences of occupational accidents leading to absenteeism were of a physical nature in the majority of cases. This was the case for both employees and freelancers.

The most commonly reported main injuries were dislocations, sprains and pulled muscles. One significant difference between employees and freelancers with regard to the nature of these injuries is that mental injury (e.g., due to traumatic experiences) was more common amongst employees.

#### *Costs of additional sickness absenteeism due to occupational accidents amounted to €660 million*

The costs of continued payment of wages due to occupational accidents are estimated based on the additional absenteeism of employees who have had occupational accidents leading to absenteeism, relative to employees who have not had accidents. Employees who reported having had occupational accidents leading to absenteeism in 2019 were absent from work for an average of 27.7 more days than were employees who did not report any accidents. This amounts to 5.4% of the total volume of absenteeism, with the additional costs of absenteeism amounting to approximately €5,800 for each employee with an occupational accident leading to absenteeism. Within the population as a whole, the total additional costs of absenteeism due to accidents have been estimated at €660 million. As with the number of occupational accidents, the costs of absenteeism due to occupational accidents have remained reasonably stable.

#### *Self-employed people without personnel (freelancers)*

The percentage of freelancers who had occupational accidents (2.1%) is lower than the percentage of employees who had occupational accidents (3.3%). In addition, freelancers were less likely to have occupational accidents leading to absenteeism. As with employees, the percentages of occupational accidents for freelancers have remained constant over time.

Amongst freelancers in 2019, occupational accidents leading to absenteeism were more common for men (1.7%) than they were for women (0.8%). With regard to educational level, freelancers who had completed only secondary education were the most likely to have accidents leading to absenteeism (2.3%). Accidents leading to absenteeism were more common for freelancers of non-Western migration background (3.2%) than for those without a migration background (1.2%).

In 2019, freelancers in the agricultural, forestry and fishing sectors reported the most occupational accidents resulting in at least one day of absenteeism (3.8%), followed by freelancers in the construction sector (3.4%).

## **CHAPTER 5: OCCUPATIONAL DISEASES**

#### *Increasing likelihood of occupational diseases, particularly for occupational mental health problems*

Nearly 12% (833 thousand) of all employees in the Netherlands reported having had one or more occupational diseases established by a physician in 2018. For 3.7% (267 thousand) of these employees, the onset of the occupational disease had taken place in the past year. Freelancers were less likely to report new occupational diseases than employees: 1.6% (15 thousand freelancers). Different sources of figures on occupational diseases apply different definitions and yield different figures. These definitions and figures are presented in Chapter 5. Taken together, they provide a more complete overview of occupational diseases in the Netherlands than does any single source alone. The likelihood of having an occupational disease increased from 3.2% in 2014 to 3.7% in 2018. The increase was due primarily to an increase in the likelihood of having work-related mental health problems (from 1.4% in 2014 to 1.9% in 2018). For freelancers, the likelihood of having an occupational disease has remained reasonably stable in recent years (2015–2019).

*Work-related mental health problems and occupational diseases involving musculoskeletal disorders are most common*

In the past year, employees reported work-related mental health problems most frequently (more than 135 thousand employees), followed by occupational diseases involving musculoskeletal disorders (114 thousand employees). Substance-related occupational diseases were reported much less frequently (18 thousand employees).

Substance-related occupational diseases often do not occur until years after the actual exposure. In some cases, they do not emerge until after retirement. Of all separate occupational diseases, emotional exhaustion/burnout was most frequently reported by employees (116 thousand employees). Of the occupational diseases involving musculoskeletal disorders, the most commonly reported were complaints involving the arms, neck or shoulders (44 thousand employees) and lower-back disorders (41 thousand employees). Freelancers were more likely to report occupational diseases involving musculoskeletal disorders (7,300 freelancers) than they were to report work-related mental health problems (4,700 freelancers) and substance-related occupational diseases (440 freelancers).

*Occupational diseases differ by sector and personal characteristics*

The likelihood of having an occupational disease was greatest in the following sectors: healthcare (4.9%), industry (4.5%) and transport (3.8%). Occupational groups with a relatively high likelihood of occupational diseases included healthcare (5.1%), services (4.5%) and agriculture (4.4%). Female employees were more likely to have an occupational disease than were male employees. The likelihood of having an occupational disease was also relatively high for employees between the ages of 45 and 64 years, employees with lower levels of education and employees with a background of migration (either Western or non-Western). For freelancers, the share of occupational diseases was relatively large for men, as well as for freelancers with a high level of education, those between the ages of 45 and 54 years and those without a background of migration.

When developing preventive policy, it is important to examine group-level characteristics that are associated with occupational diseases. The three group-level, work-related characteristics that were most strongly associated with all occupational diseases together were as follows: dissatisfaction with work, high psychological task demands and repetitive movements. Addressing these factors could

thus potentially be the most effective way to reduce the likelihood of occupational diseases, regardless of diagnostic category.

For work-related mental health problems, these characteristics were as follows: dissatisfaction with work, high level of difficulty of the work and conflicts with supervisors or employers. The following characteristics were most strongly associated with occupational diseases involving musculoskeletal disorders: repetitive movements, uncomfortable working postures and high psychological task demands.

*Cost of additional sickness absenteeism due to occupational diseases amounted to €2.5 billion, reflecting a sharp increase*

Each year, occupational diseases result in a large volume of additional sickness absenteeism, amounting to nearly 10 million days in 2018. This accounted for 19% of the total number of days of absenteeism for employees in that year, reflecting a sharp increase relative to 2016 (6.9 million days). The average absenteeism for employees who reported having had contracted an occupational disease that was established by a physician in the past year was 45 days.

This was 39 days more than for employees with no occupational disease, who were absent from work for an average of six days. Employees with work-related mental health problems had the highest absenteeism: 60 days additional absenteeism. For the population as a whole, emotional exhaustion/burnout (more than 7.2 million days), depression (2 million days) and lower-back disorders (740 thousand days) contributed the greatest share of the additional absenteeism.

The additional absenteeism due to occupational diseases has been estimated to cost €2.5 billion due to continued payment of wages. The largest cost items were work-related mental health problems (€2.1 billion) and occupational diseases involving musculoskeletal disorders (€470 million). The highest costs were incurred in the healthcare sector (€540 million), followed by the industrial (€310 million) and trade sectors (€300 million). The costs have increased sharply since 2014, when they amounted to only €1.2 billion. This increase was due largely to a more than twofold rise in costs due to work-related mental health problems: from €1 billion in 2014 to €2.1 billion in 2018.

The increase is largely attributable to a rise in the number of additional days of absenteeism due to work-related mental health problems.

*Occupational diseases resulted in 4,100 fatalities per year*

In 2018, the number of fatalities resulting from occupational diseases was estimated at 4,100 working and retired employees (2.7% of all deaths in the Netherlands): more than 800 people in the working population and 3,300 retired employees. The number of fatalities due to substance-related occupational diseases amounted to nearly three fourths of all work-related deaths: 570 people in the working population and 2,700 retirees. The greatest share of these deaths due to occupational diseases do not occur until after the working years, because the diseases do not emerge or lead to death until after a long time.

*Greatest burden of disease due to diseases involving the respiratory system*

Burden of disease—a measure of health loss—is expressed in ‘disability-adjusted life-years’ (DALY): the number of years lost to premature death and the number of years with the illness, corrected for the severity of the disease. In 2018, this work-related burden of disease accounted for 4.6% of the total burden of disease (nearly 238 thousand DALY). More than 60% of this burden of disease occurred during the working years, with nearly 40% occurring in the retired population. The occupational diseases with the greatest burden of disease were diseases involving the respiratory system (21% of the total burden of disease due to occupational risk), followed by conditions involving musculoskeletal disorders (19%), mental health problems (18%) and cancer (17%). Within the working population, conditions involving musculoskeletal disorders and mental health problems accounted for the largest share of the burden of disease, followed by diseases involving the respiratory system. Amongst retirees, diseases involving the respiratory system and cancer were responsible for the greatest contribution to the total burden of disease.

The 2020 Arbobalans report provides a broad overview of the quality of work in the Netherlands, as well as of developments in this regard. Based on recent data from monitors and studies, the 2020 Arbobalans report provides an image of exposure to occupational risks, the occupations and sectors that are most at risk, and the measures that companies have taken in this regard. The 2020 Arbobalans report then provides a discussion of the unfavourable working conditions in terms of sickness absenteeism, occupational accidents and occupational diseases. Special attention is paid to vulnerable groups and the specific positions of freelancers and employees with flexible employment contracts (e.g., temporary employees and employees with temporary contracts).

