



Faculty of Social Science
and Public Policy

Severe mental illness in the UK

Public perceptions and healthcare priorities

November 2025

About this study

This report examines the public's understanding of and attitudes towards severe mental illness (SMI), revealing some significant misconceptions and uncertainty about key issues.

Drawing on a major survey of the UK population, carried out with Opinium, the study explores how views on mental and physical health vary, public perceptions of SMI, and the adequacy of current healthcare provision.

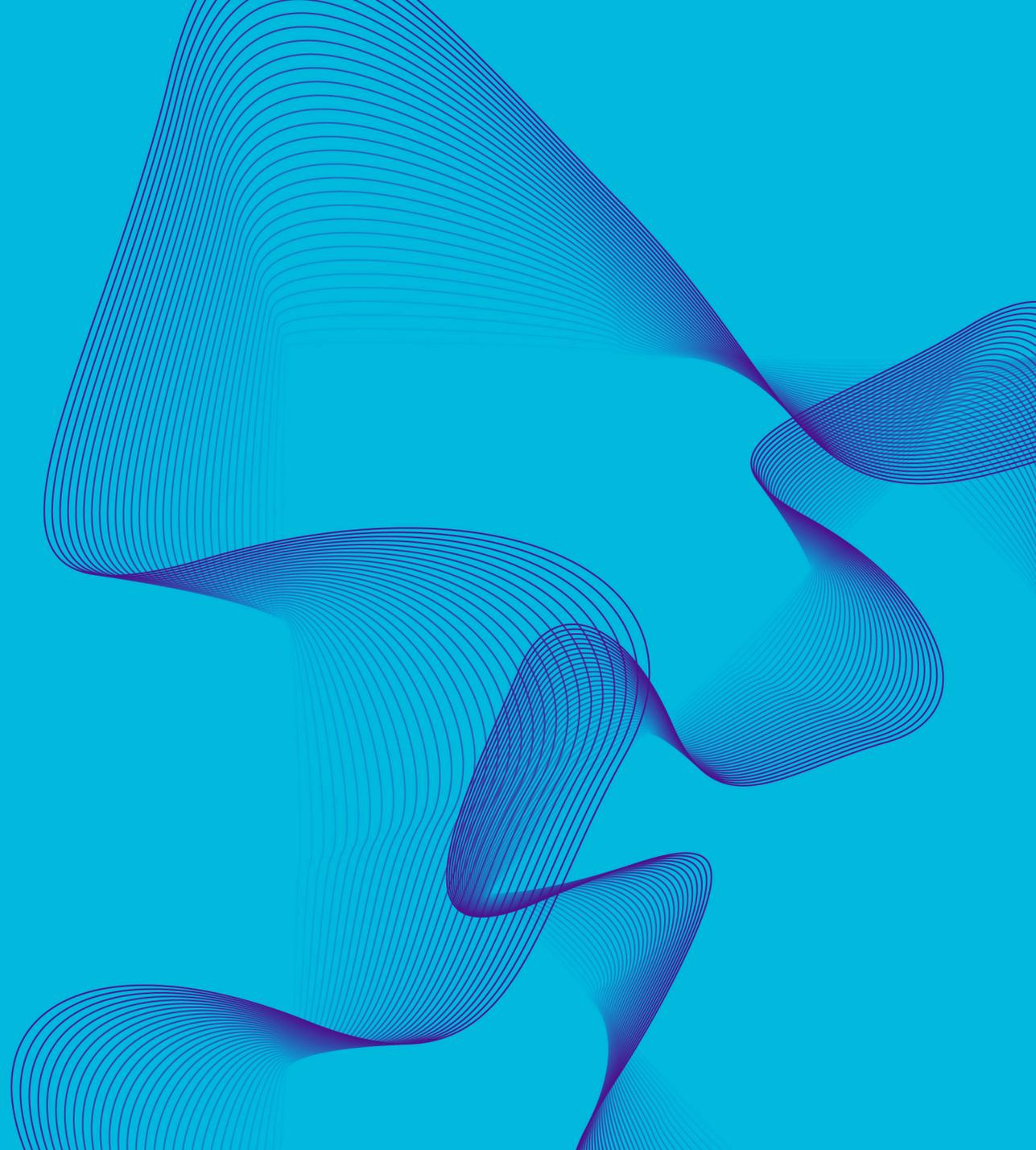
The findings highlight where perceptions align with or diverge from the best available evidence, exposing knowledge gaps on a range of issues, including the extent to which those with SMI face reduced life expectancy, the leading causes of premature deaths for people with SMI, and which groups in society are most affected.

Published at a time when the share of NHS spending on mental health is expected to decline in 2025/26, the report also provides insights into how the public feel the healthcare system should deal with SMI. It reveals a broad consensus that more must be done to improve the lives and life expectancy of people with SMI, even if the public are more divided on whether this should be prioritised over other goals.

Fieldwork

Opinium surveyed 2,000 UK adults aged 18+, between 7 and 10 October 2025, via an online access panel. Data is weighted by age, gender, ethnicity, region, social grade and working status in order to reflect the profile of the UK population.

Summary



Mental health is the public's biggest health concern, but only a minority think it's given equal weight in the healthcare system

A majority of the public view mental health as equally important to physical health for both the nation as a whole and individuals themselves

- Mental health and cancer are tied as the biggest perceived health problem facing the nation with 45% and 44% respectively listing it in their top three concerns.
- Mental health is the biggest health worry on an individual level, with one in four (26%) saying they are personally worried about it with regard to their own health.

In recent years, people have become more likely to feel mental and physical health are treated equally by the healthcare system

- One in three (33%) people now think mental and physical health are treated equally – up from one in five (20%) in 2019. This is despite mental health still only making up less than a tenth of NHS spending, even though it is the biggest cause of lost work days in the UK and globally.
- And despite this shift in attitudes, a larger proportion of people – 45% – still think physical health is treated as more important by the healthcare system, although this has declined from 64% in 2019.

The public's understanding of severe mental illness is patchy

A majority can identify what conditions are typically classed as severe mental illness, but most underestimate the impact of SMI on life expectancy

- When asked to name diagnosable SMIs, the public's top three answers are the three that are typically defined as SMIs: schizophrenia, psychosis, and bipolar disorder.
- But only 11% correctly guess that severe mental illness reduces life expectancy by 15-20 years on average, with the median guess being far short of this, at just 7 years. The lack of awareness of this mortality gap means it is a hidden health crisis for the more than 500,000 people with SMI in the UK.
- In fact, SMI reduces lifespans by more than diabetes, severe obesity and even smoking – but the public wrongly think these conditions and risk factors have a bigger negative impact.

There is a common misperception that suicide is a key driver of reduced lifespan in those with SMI

- The public think suicide is the most common factor that reduces life expectancy among those with SMI, with 50% listing it as a common cause, when in reality it accounts for less than 10 % of excess mortality.

There are also misperceptions about which groups SMI is more prevalent in

- Only 14% correctly recognise the higher prevalence of SMI among Black African and Black Caribbean British communities, and just 27% correctly recognise the higher prevalence of SMI in urban areas.

There is broad support for improving healthcare for those with SMI, but uncertainty of whether it is doable or a priority

Most people think the healthcare system should do more to support those living with SMI

- Two-thirds (66%) of people agree better healthcare needs to be provided in order to improve the life expectancy of people with SMI.

Opinions are mixed on whether better healthcare for people with SMI is doable or a priority

- A third (33%) of the public say it is not too challenging to improve the life expectancy of those with SMI through healthcare, while virtually the same proportion (30%) feel it is too difficult.
- Opinion is similarly split on whether there are (28%) or are not (33%) more urgent priorities for the healthcare system than the life expectancy of people with SMI.

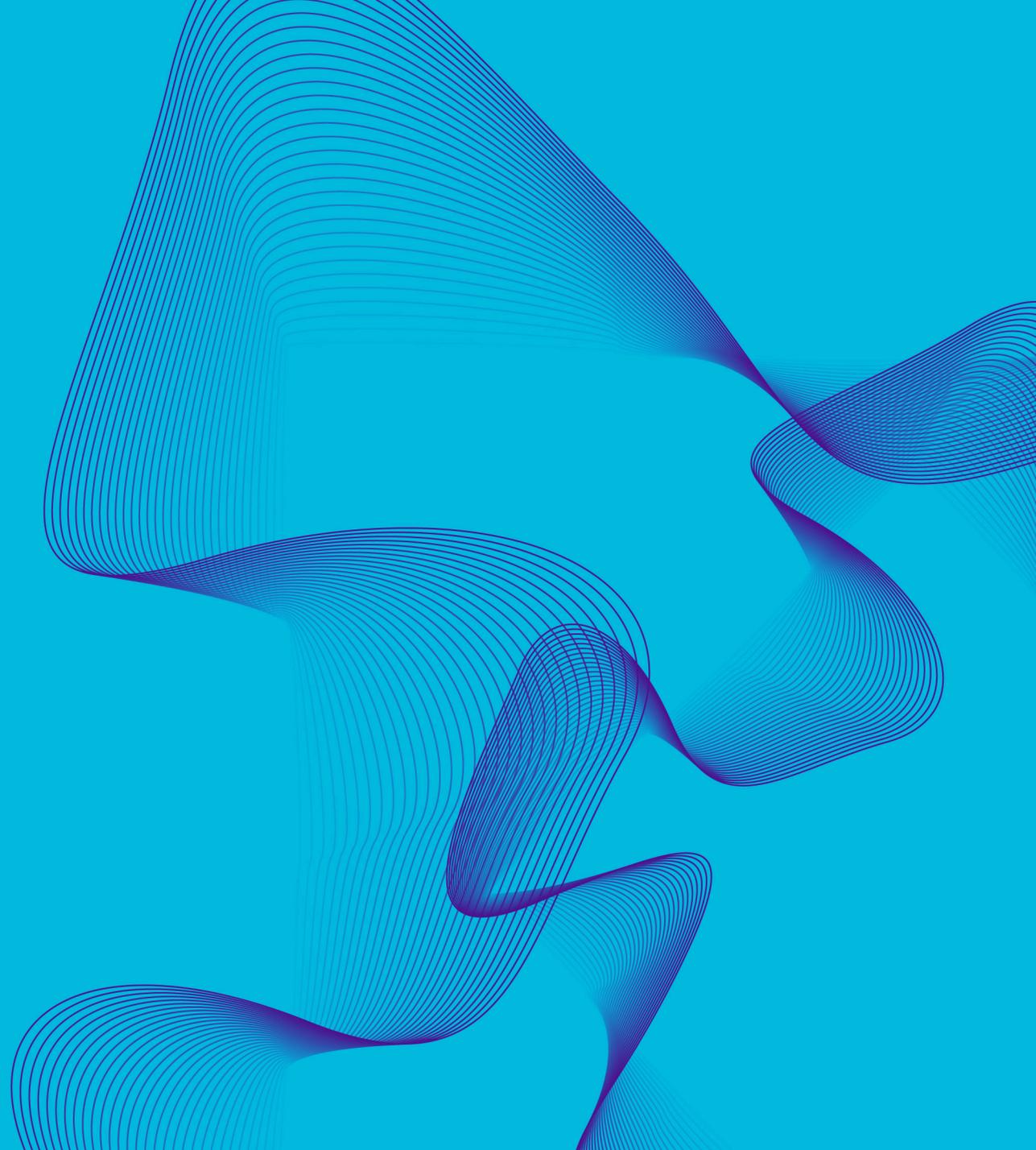
Younger people are less likely to prioritise improving healthcare for those with SMI

- Younger adults aged 18-34 are around twice as likely (39%) as over-55s (21%) to say there are more urgent priorities for the healthcare system than improving the life expectancy of people with SMI. Young people are also more likely to say it is too challenging to do so.

1. Perceptions of mental vs physical health

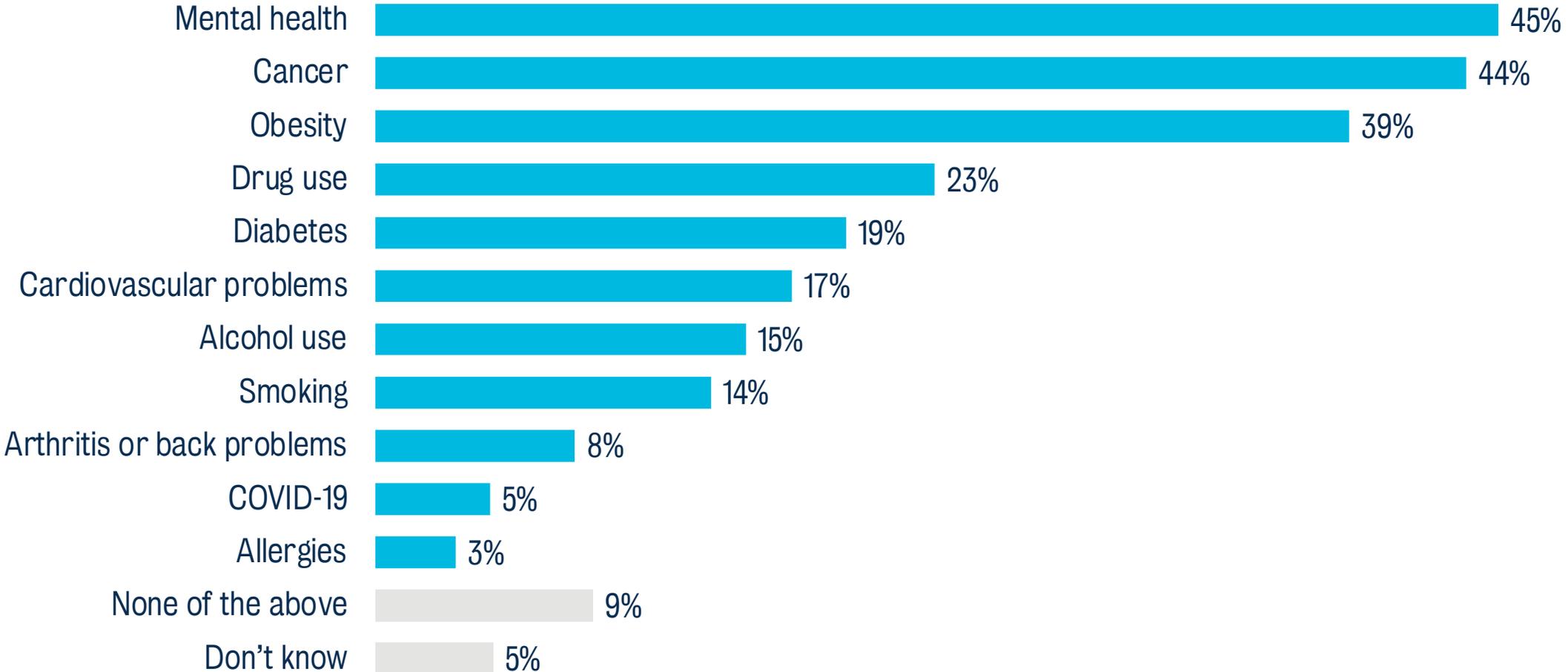
Mental health is top of the public's health concerns, on a par with cancer as the biggest health challenge for both the nation as a whole and individuals themselves.

And while there has been a big decline in the share of people saying physical health is treated as more important by the healthcare system, the reality is that mental health still makes up less than a tenth of the NHS budget, despite being the biggest cause of lost work days in the UK and globally.



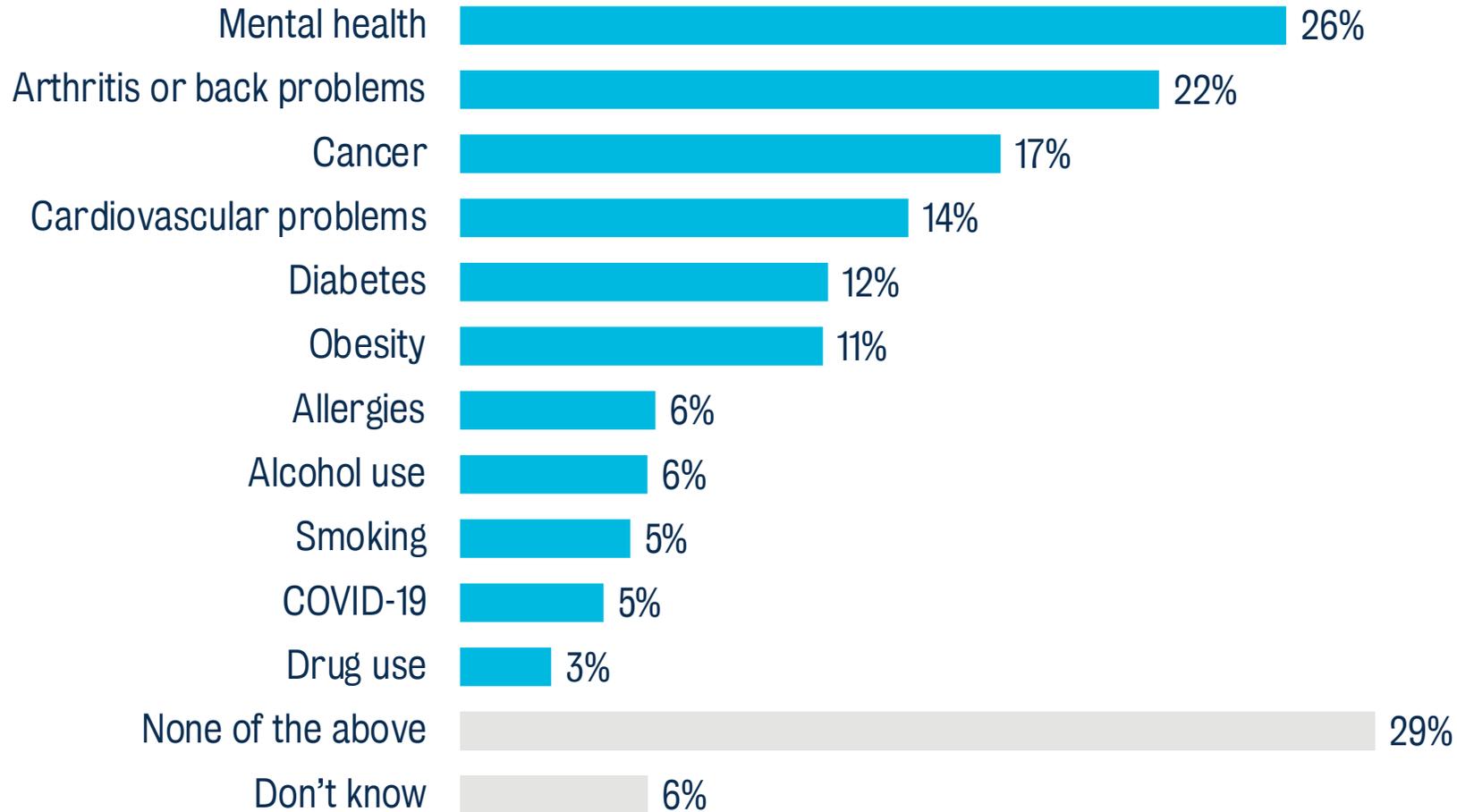
Mental health is tied with cancer as the biggest perceived health problem facing the nation...

Thinking generally, which of the following, if any, do you see as the biggest health problems facing people in your country today? (Please select up to 3 options)



...and the biggest health concern for individuals personally

And which, if any, are you personally most concerned about regarding your own health?



Women are more likely than men to perceive mental health problems as one of the three biggest health problems in the country today

Thinking generally, which of the following, if any, do you see as the biggest health problems facing people in your country today? (Please select up to 3 options)

Overall 45%

Female 52%

Male 38%

18-34 50%

35-54 47%

55+ 41%

Has physical health conditions 48%

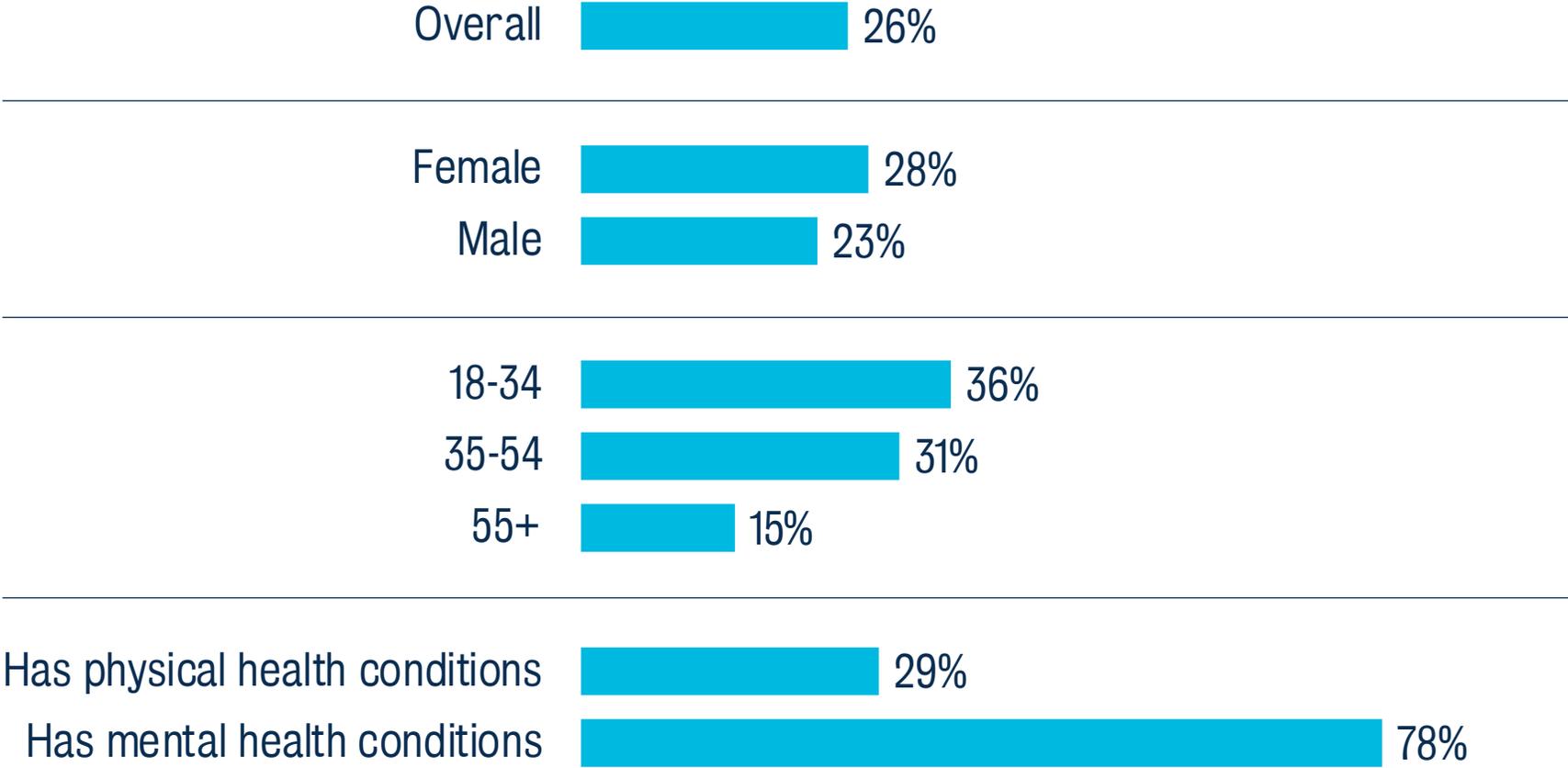
Has mental health conditions 70%

% who perceive **mental health problems** as one of the three biggest health problems in the country today

Under-55s are more than twice as likely as those aged 55+ to list mental health as a main concern regarding their own health

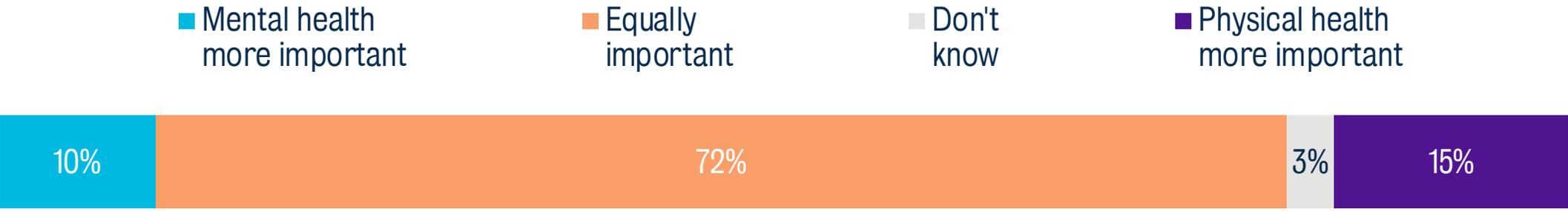
And which, if any, are you personally most concerned about regarding your own health?

% who list **mental health** as a main concern regarding their own health



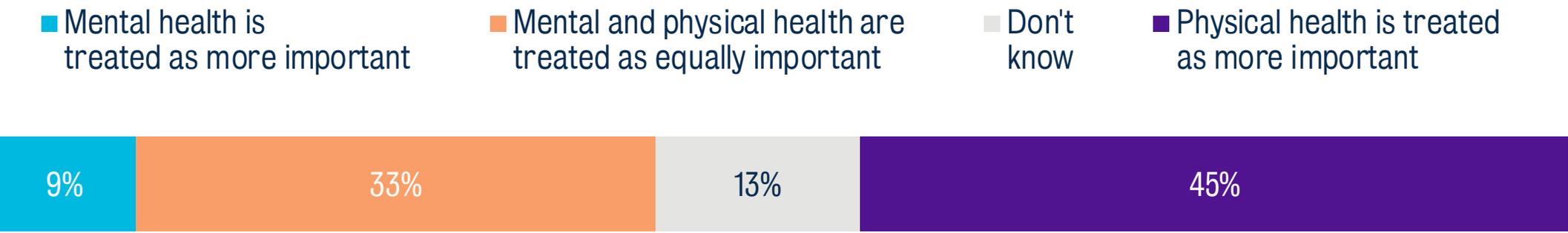
Seven in 10 people regard physical and mental health as equally important...

Thinking about your own health, do you think that mental health or physical health is more important, or are they equally important?



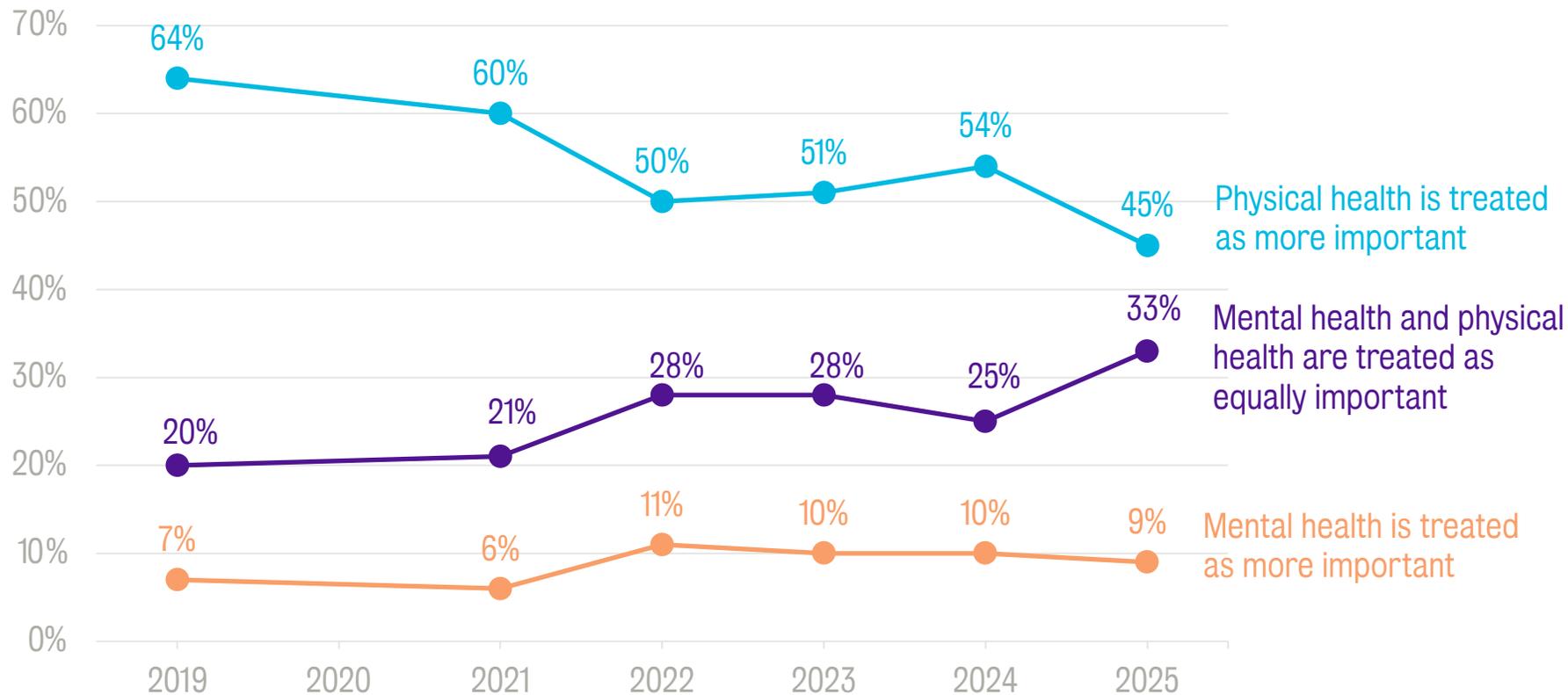
...BUT people are most likely to feel physical health is treated as more important than mental health in the health system

Which of the following best describes how mental and physical health are treated in your country's health care system?



People have become more likely to feel mental and physical health are treated equally by the healthcare system – even though mental health still only makes up a small part of NHS spending

Which of the following best describes how mental and physical health are treated in your country's health care system?



NHS spending in 2024/5 is expected to be £170bn, of which £15bn is expected to be on mental health, amounting to 8.8% of the health service's total expenditure.

Since 2021 the proportion of NHS spending on mental health has increased, and during this time the NHS in England has had a Mental Health Investment Standard requiring increased expenditure on mental health.

However, this ringfencing has recently been loosened and mental health spending as a share of baseline NHS spending is expected to fall slightly – by 0.07% – in 2025/26.

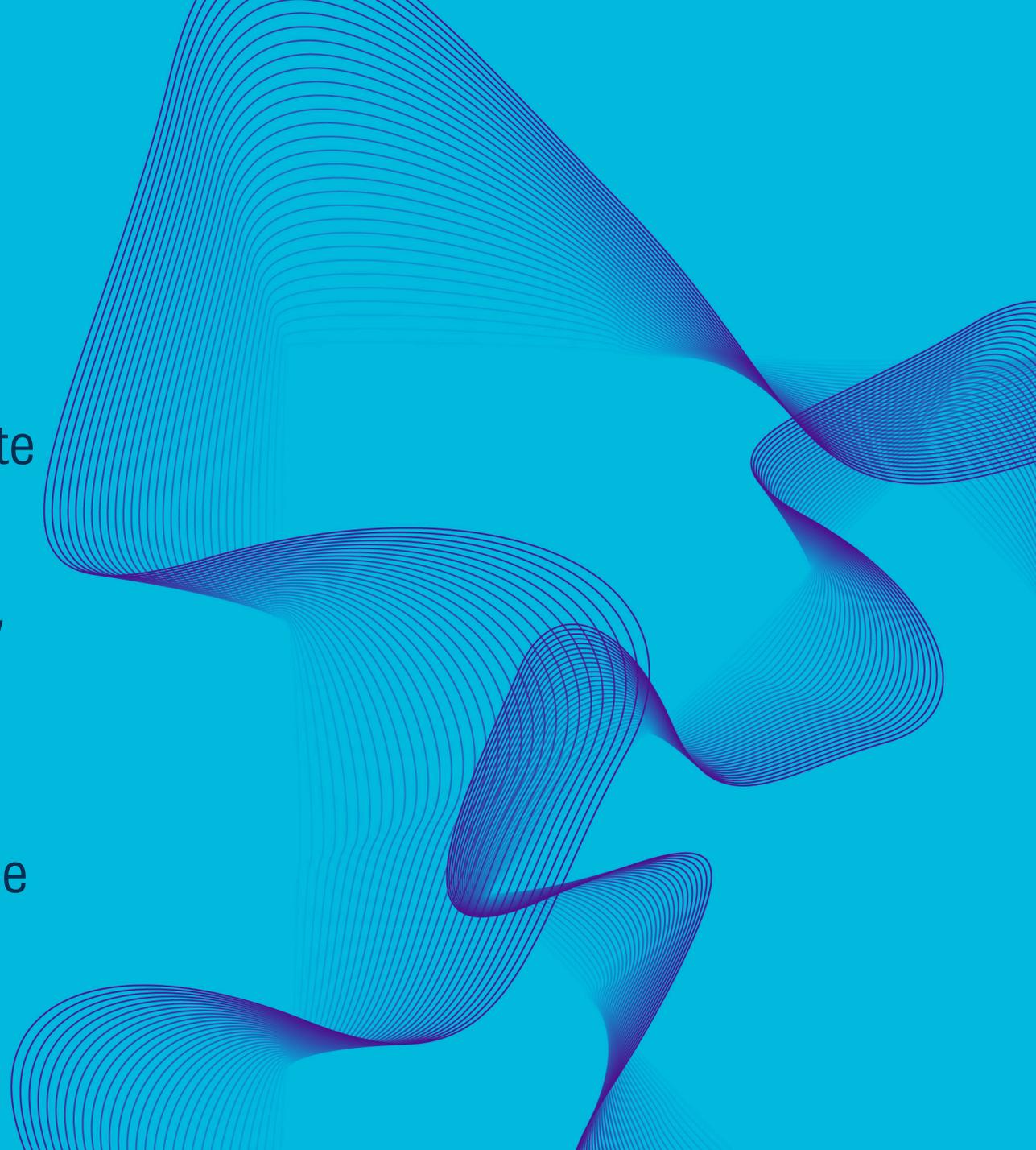
Despite mental health making up less than a tenth of the NHS budget, it is the biggest cause of lost work days in the UK and globally.

2. Perceptions of severe mental illness

A majority of the public can identify what conditions are typically classed as severe mental illness, but they greatly underestimate the impact of SMI on life expectancy.

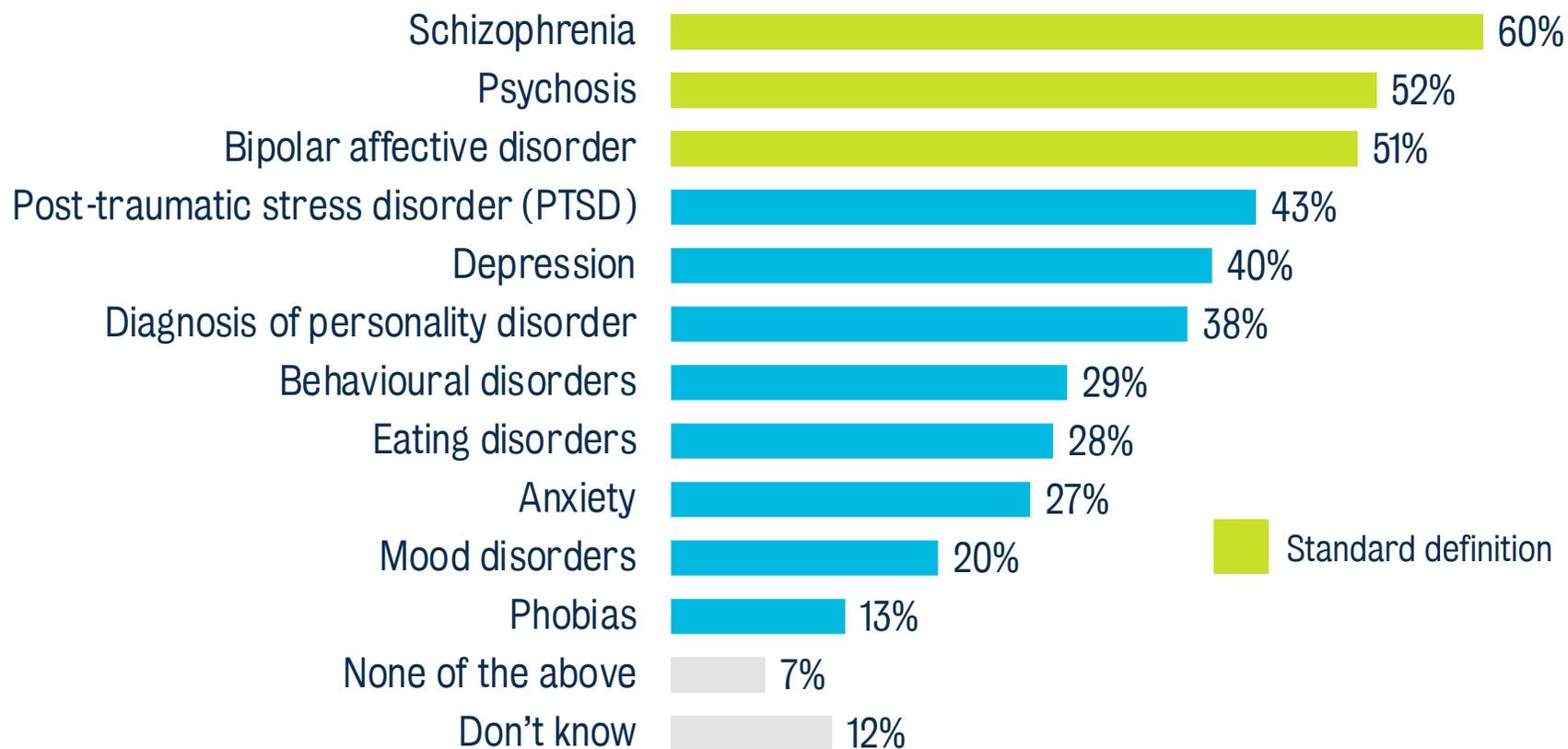
There is a common misperception that suicide is a key driver of this, when in reality preventable physical conditions – which are more common in those with SMI – are the primary contributor.

And only small minorities correctly recognise the higher prevalence of SMI in urban areas and among Black African and Black Caribbean British communities.



A majority of the public correctly identify the diagnoses of severe mental illness (although large minorities wrongly think it includes other conditions)

Which of the following do you think are considered diagnoses of 'severe mental illness' by health professionals in England? (Please select all that apply)



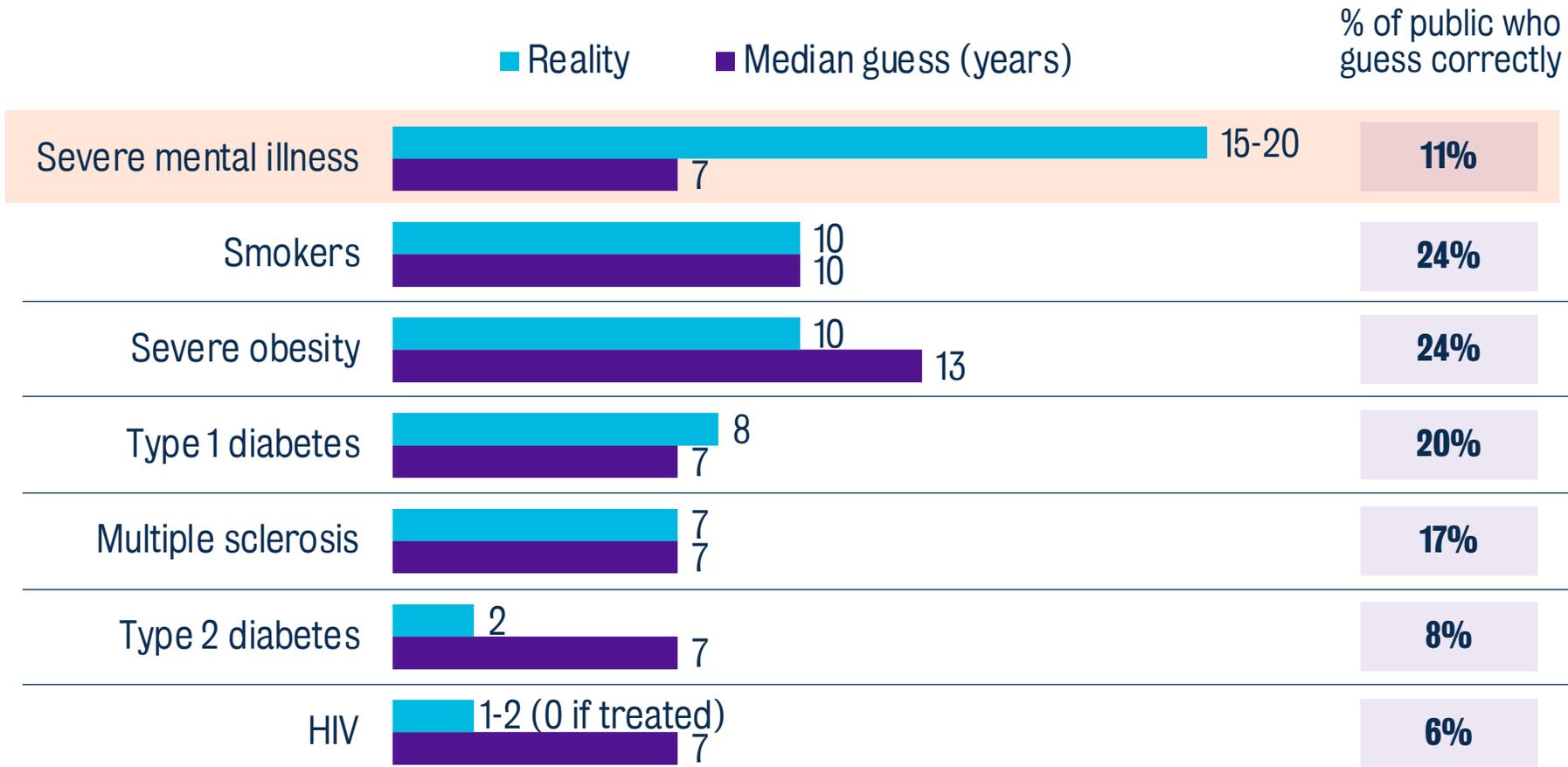
The term “severe mental illness” is a clinical definition used by the NHS in England to refer to all individuals who have received a diagnosis of psychosis, schizophrenia or bipolar affective disorder.

This definition does not mean that other diagnoses are not “severe”, or that they do not carry any associated physical health risk.

The definition aligns to NICE guidance for physical health checks and the scope of the Quality and Outcome Framework SMI register (the primary care register used to collect population level data and monitor uptake of annual SMI health checks).

Only 11% correctly guess severe mental illness reduces lifespans by 15+ years on average

On average, people with chronic mental and physical health conditions can live shorter lives than the general population. How much shorter than the general population, if at all, do you think people with these conditions' lives will be, on average?



People with severe mental illness experience one of the greatest health inequalities of our time, dying 15-20 years early. But only 11% of the public correctly recognise this is the case. This lack of awareness means the mortality gap for people with SMI is a hidden health crisis for the more than 500,000 people living with SMI in the UK.

People wrongly think suicide is the most common factor reducing life expectancy in those with severe mental illness. In reality, preventable physical conditions are the more common causes

Which of the following, if any, do you think are the most common health conditions or factors that reduce life expectancy among people with severe mental illness?



Despite much higher rates in those with severe mental illness compared to the general population, suicide accounts for approximately 9% of excess mortality in those with severe mental illness.

Compared to the general population, people with severe mental illness are:

- 6.6 times more likely to die prematurely from respiratory disease.
- 6.5 times more likely to die prematurely from liver disease.
- 4.1 times more likely to die prematurely from cardiovascular disease.
- 2.3 times more likely to die prematurely from cancer.

What is behind the premature mortality gap for people with severe mental illness?



Lifestyle and medications

People with SMI are more likely to experience lifestyle factors that impact their physical health such as higher-fat diets and smoking. Symptoms of untreated SMI contribute to these lifestyle factors, for example a lack of motivation and not wanting to look after yourself or your needs is a negative symptom of schizophrenia. While taking evidence-based medication does reduce mortality in people with SMI at a population level, anti-psychotic medications are also associated with a wide range of side-effects impacting the risk of physical health co-morbidities. It is therefore paramount that physical health risk factors are managed proactively from the onset of mental health care.



Consequences

- People with severe mental illness face stark health inequalities, with an average life expectancy 15-20 years shorter than the general population. This mortality gap is widening.
- 2 in 3 premature deaths in people with SMI are from preventable physical health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, liver disease, and cancer.
- People with SMI develop these physical health conditions at an earlier age and are less likely to receive evidence-based care to support them to live well with the conditions.

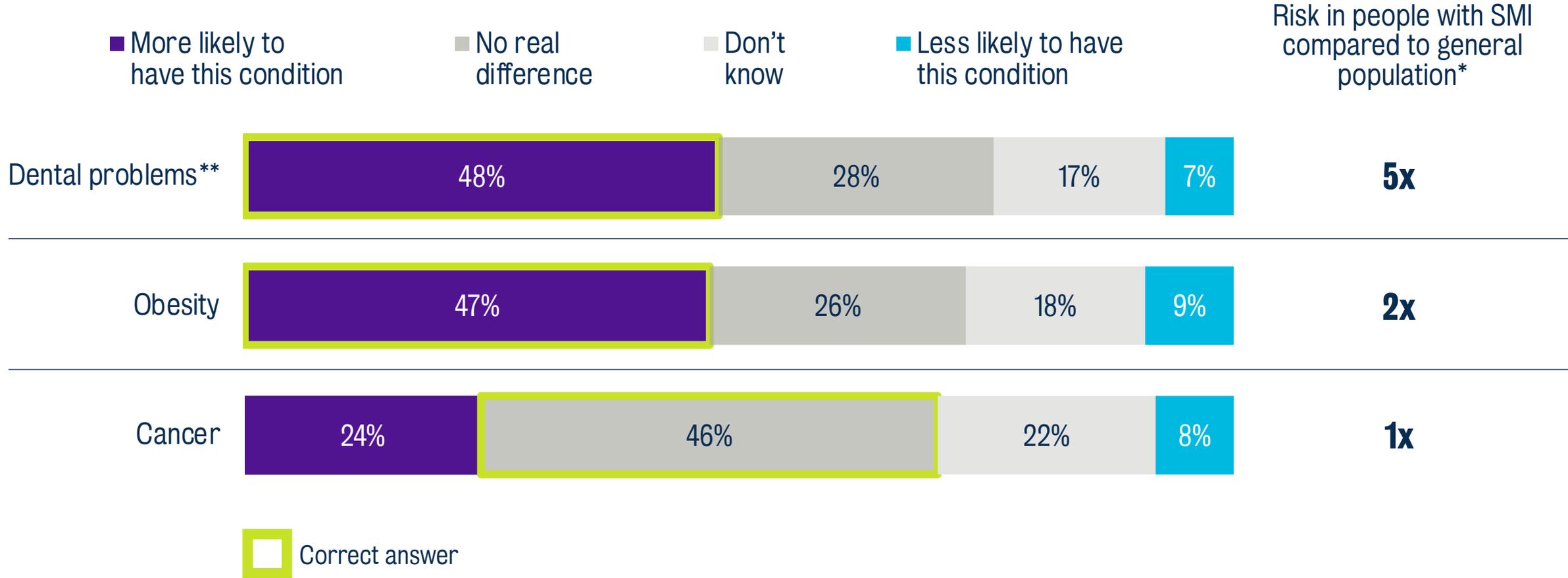


Inequity in access and “diagnostic overshadowing”

People with SMI experience inequalities in recognising risk factors early to prevent the development of physical health conditions and in receiving treatment to manage these risk factors. For example, people with SMI are less likely to have high blood pressure recognised and treated, and more likely to have a delayed diagnosis of cancer leading to poorer cancer outcomes. Failure to recognise symptoms of physical health conditions because of someone’s SMI is called “diagnostic overshadowing”.

The public correctly recognise that dental problems and obesity are more common in people with severe mental illness and cancer rates are the same...

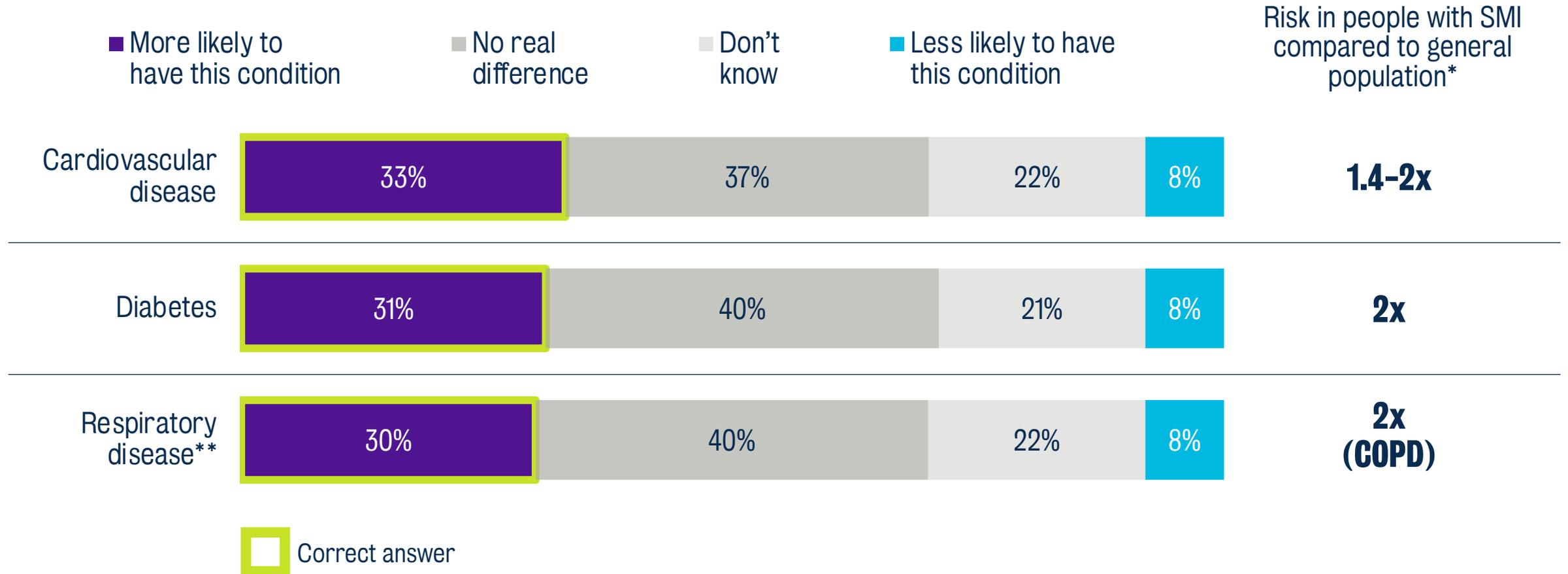
And do you think people with severe mental illness are more or less likely to have these conditions than the population as a whole, or do you think there is no real difference?



*Sources for risk levels: [dental problems](#), [obesity](#), [cancer](#)
 **...e.g. tooth decay and loss. Base: 2,000 UK respondents age 18+, surveyed 7-10 October 2025

...yet they're most likely to *wrongly* think cardiovascular disease, diabetes and respiratory conditions are equally widespread

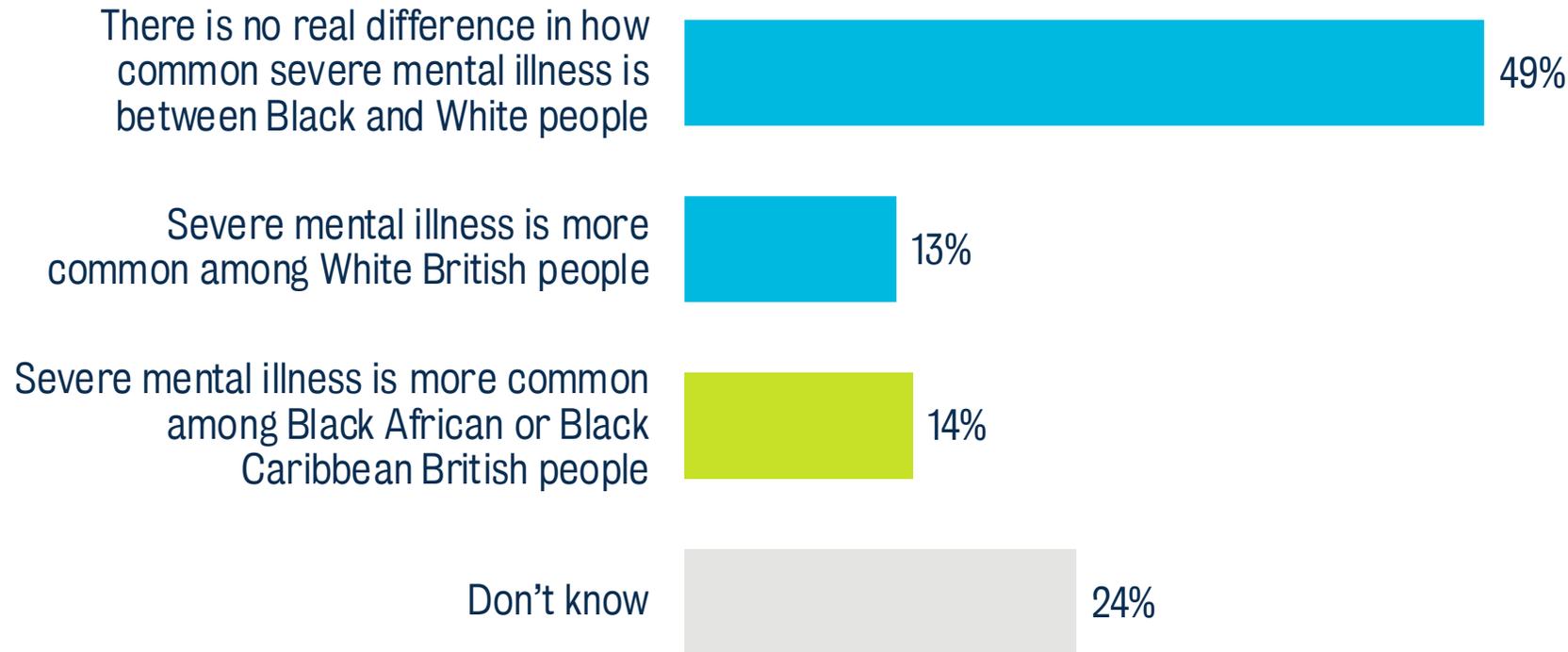
And do you think people with severe mental illness are more or less likely to have these conditions than the population as a whole, or do you think there is no real difference?



Only 14% correctly recognise SMI is more common in people from Black African or Black Caribbean British backgrounds

Which of the following do you think is most accurate?

 Correct answer



People from Black ethnic minority groups are:

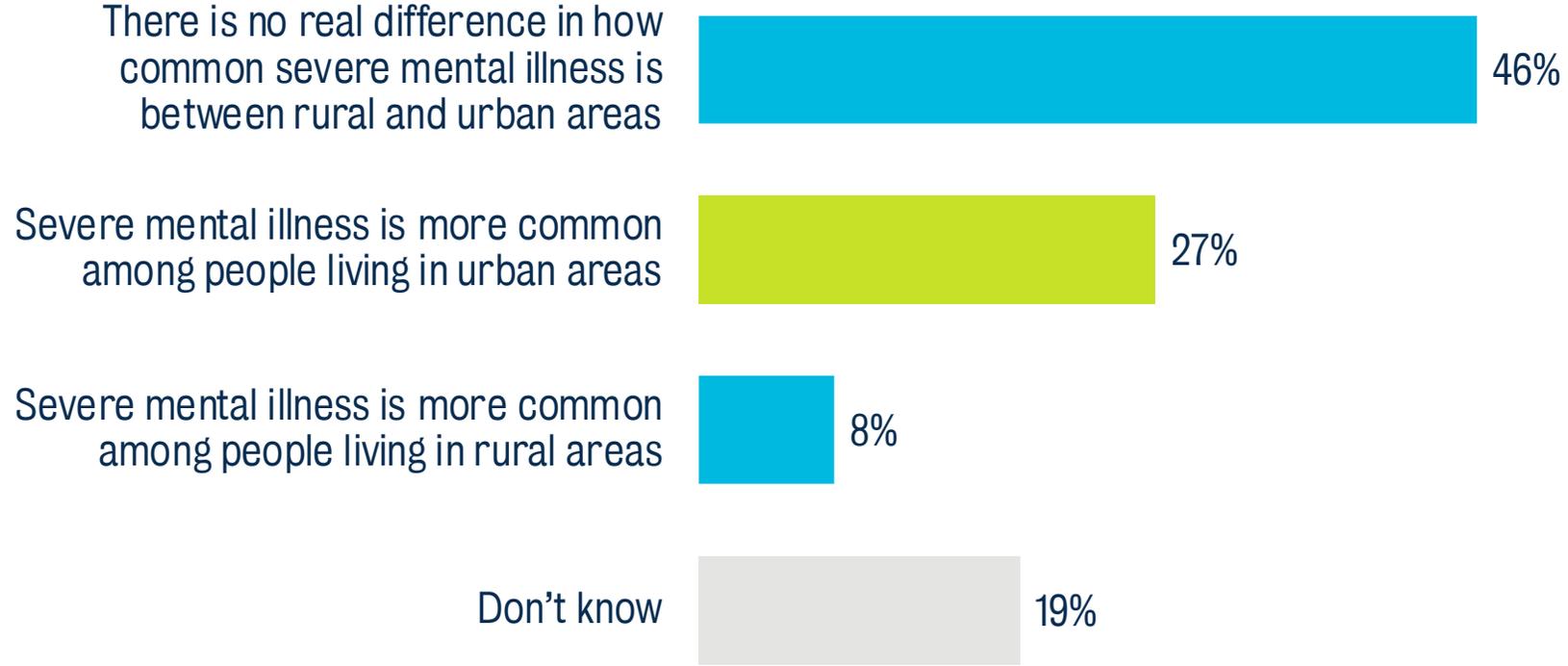
- Almost three times more likely to have psychosis than people from White ethnic groups in the UK.
- Almost six times more at risk of having schizophrenia than the general population.

Bipolar is less clear as there are issues with misdiagnosis.

Only three in 10 correctly think severe mental illness is more common in urban areas

Which of the following do you think is most accurate?

 Correct answer

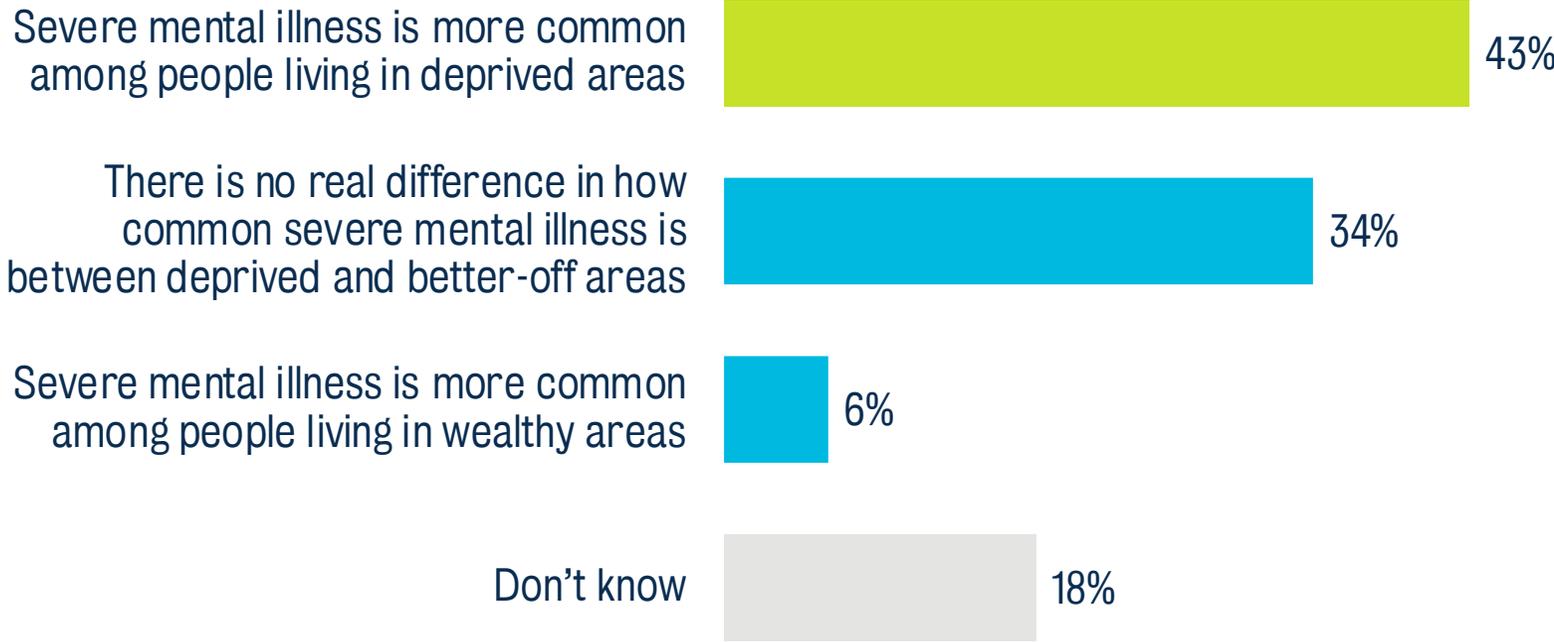


The risk of developing psychosis – a severe psychiatric disorder associated with hallucinations, delusions, paranoia and disorganised thought – is 77% higher in those who live in urban rather than rural areas.

Two in five correctly think severe mental illness is more common among those living in deprived areas

Which of the following do you think is most accurate?

 Correct answer

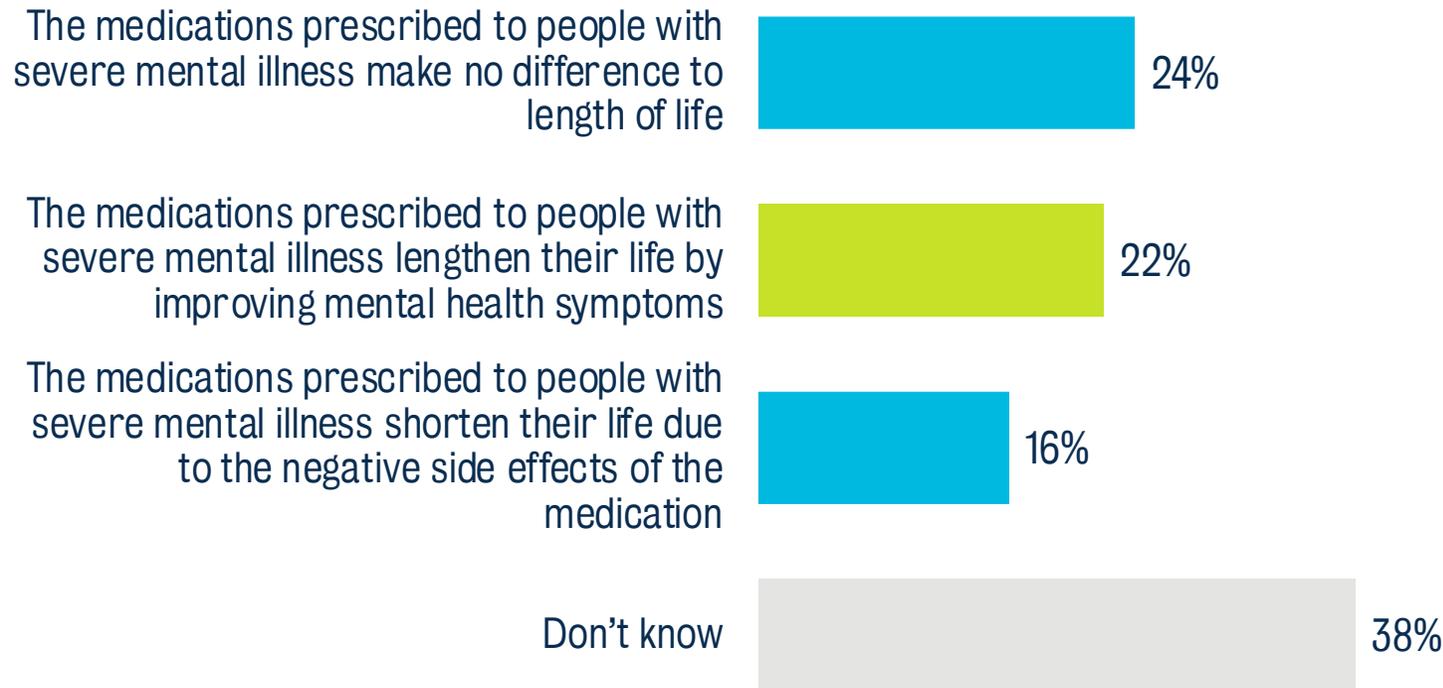


People in the the most deprived areas are nearly five times more likely to receive a diagnosis of schizophrenia, than those in the least deprived areas.

Only one in five believe that medications prescribed for severe mental illness lengthen patient lifespan, with the public most likely to say they don't know

Which of the following do you think is most accurate?

 Correct answer



Antipsychotics, mood stabilisers, and antidepressants reduce morbidity and mortality at a population level.

For example, clozapine is an antipsychotic which should be prescribed to people with schizophrenia who have not responded to at least two other antipsychotic drugs. Evidence shows that if you should be on clozapine but are not, there is double the mortality risk.

While taking evidence-based medication does reduce mortality in people with SMI at a population level, anti-psychotic medications are also associated with a wide range of side-effects, impacting the risk of physical health co-morbidities. It is therefore paramount that physical health risk factors are managed proactively from the onset of mental health care.

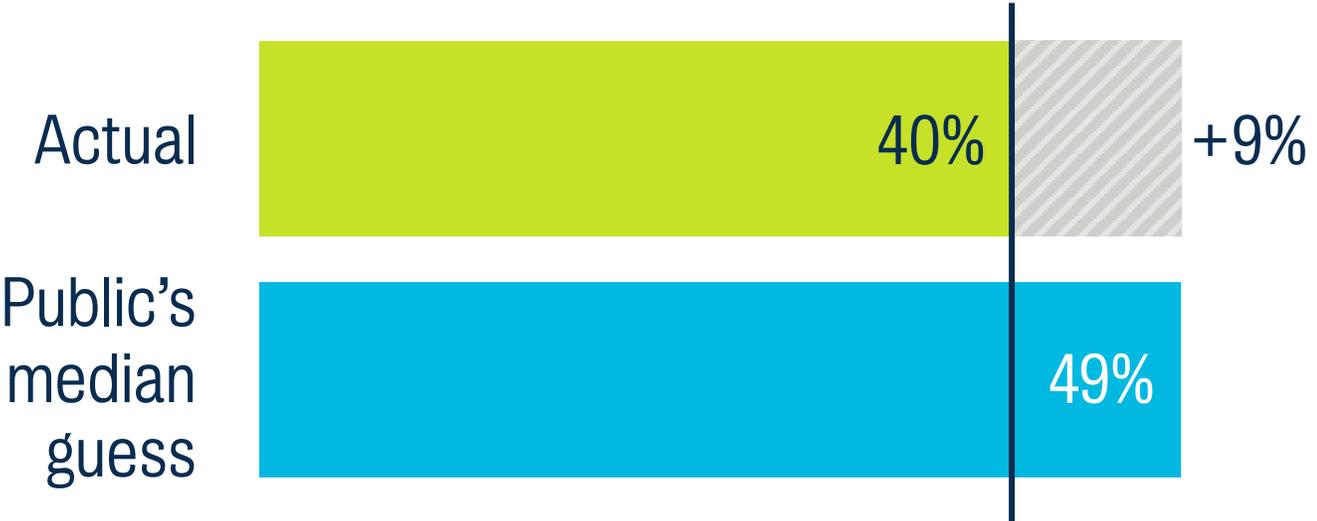
People underestimate how common severe mental illness is, but do perceive it to be more common than some well-known physical illnesses

Please rank the following health conditions according to how common you think they are. Rank them so that 1 is most common and 4 is least common.

	Perceived rank of most (1) to least (4) common	Correct rank	Number of people in UK with condition
Type 1 Diabetes (A condition where the body cannot make enough insulin. This type of diabetes is not preventable)	1	2	270,000
Severe mental illness (Psychotic disorders, schizophrenia, and bipolar affective disorder)	2	1	534,204
Multiple Sclerosis (A condition affecting central nervous system, causing symptoms like blurred vision and problems with how people move and think)	3	3	105,800
HIV (A virus that attacks the body's immune system)	4	4	97,740

People slightly overestimate the proportion of people with severe mental illness who smoke, but correctly guess it is significantly higher the share of the general population

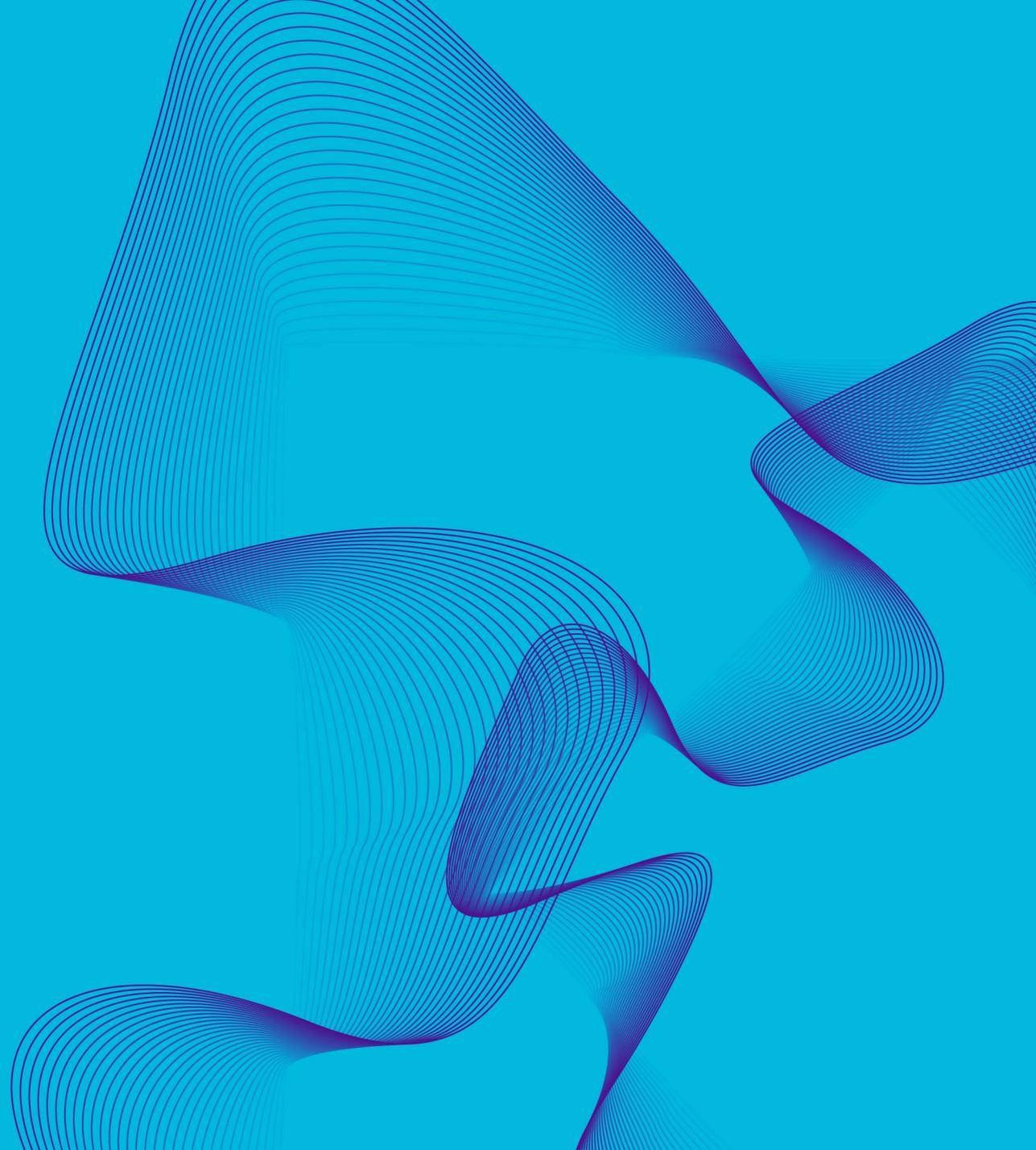
In the UK, 11.9% of the general population smoke. What percentage of people with severe mental illness do you think smoke?



3. How the healthcare system should respond

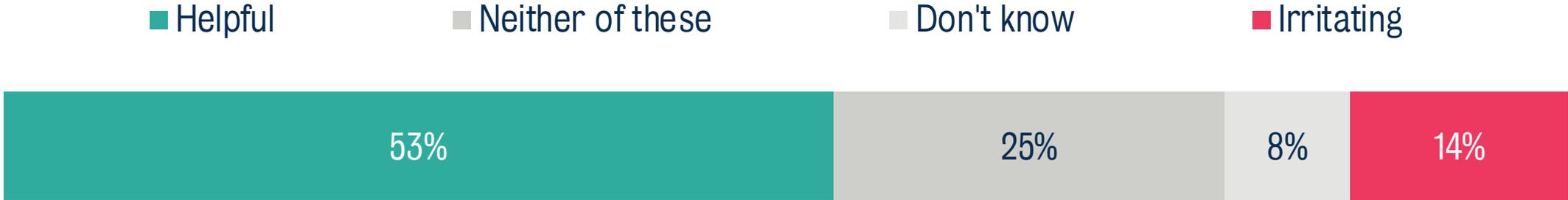
Most people think the healthcare system should do more to support those living with severe mental illness, with around two-thirds agreeing that better care is needed to improve life expectancy.

Half the public believe people with severe mental illness don't currently get the help they need, however younger adults are more likely than older generations to see other priorities as more pressing – or to feel that improving life expectancy for people with SMI is too difficult a goal.



A majority say they would find a discussion with a GP about lifestyle useful when visiting for a physical health problem...

If you visited your GP for a physical health problem and they asked you **about your lifestyle** – for example your diet and exercise – would you generally find this...



...and say they would also find it helpful to discuss their mental health

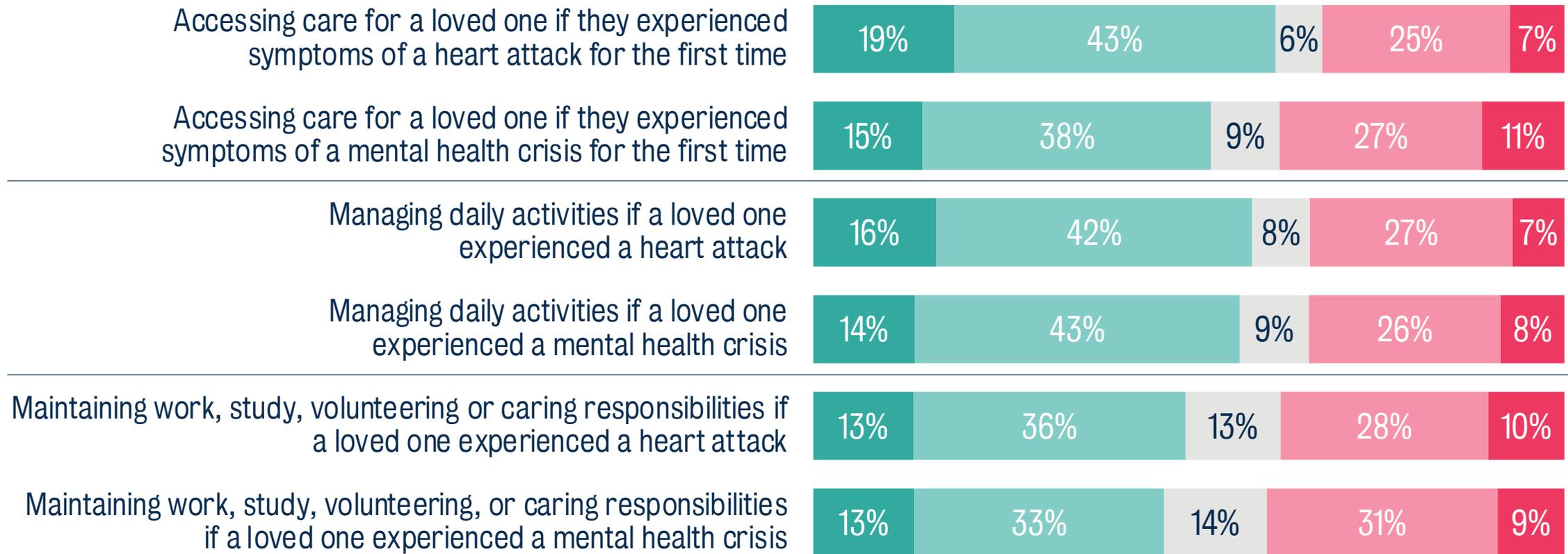
And if you visited your GP for a physical health problem and they asked you **about your mental health**, would you find this...



People are only slightly more confident supporting a family member who had suffered a heart attack than one who had experienced a mental health crisis

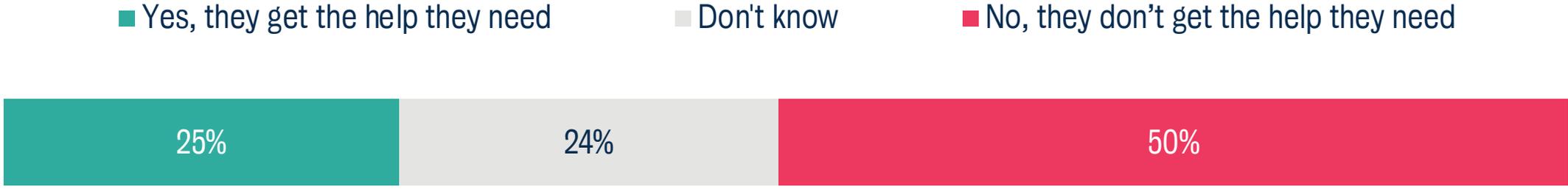
The following questions ask how confident you feel helping a friend or family member access health care. How confident, if at all, would you feel:

■ Very confident
 ■ Fairly confident
 ■ Don't know
 ■ Not very confident
 ■ Not at all confident

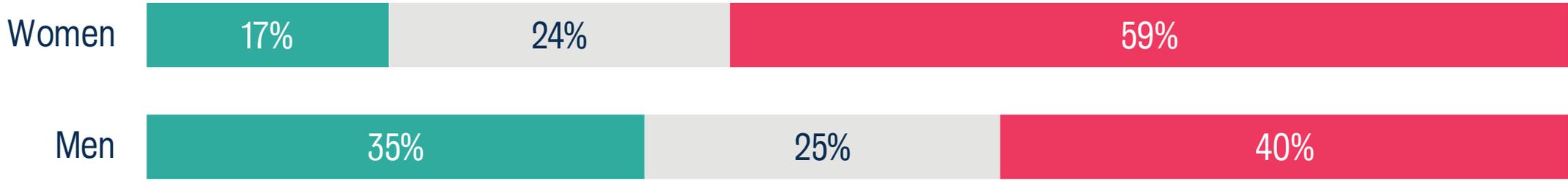


Half the public believe those with severe mental illness do not get the help they need – double the proportion who say the opposite...

Severe mental illness is a term given to a group of mental illnesses that are often long-term conditions affecting daily living. This is a clinical definition that includes psychotic disorders, schizophrenia, and bipolar affective disorder. Thinking about all you know about the health care in your country, do you think that people with severe mental illness get the help they need, or not?



...and women are twice as likely as men to say those with severe mental illness do not get the help they need



Two-thirds of people agree better healthcare needs to be provided for people with severe mental illness to improve their life expectancy, compared with three in 10 who feel this is too challenging or not an urgent priority

People with severe mental illness on average have a life expectancy 15-20 years shorter than the average person due to preventable health conditions. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

■ Strongly agree
 ■ Tend to agree
 ■ Neither agree or disagree
 ■ Don't know
 ■ Tend to disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree

We need to provide better healthcare for people with severe mental illness to improve their life expectancy



It is too challenging to provide people with severe mental illness with the type of healthcare needed to improve their life expectancy

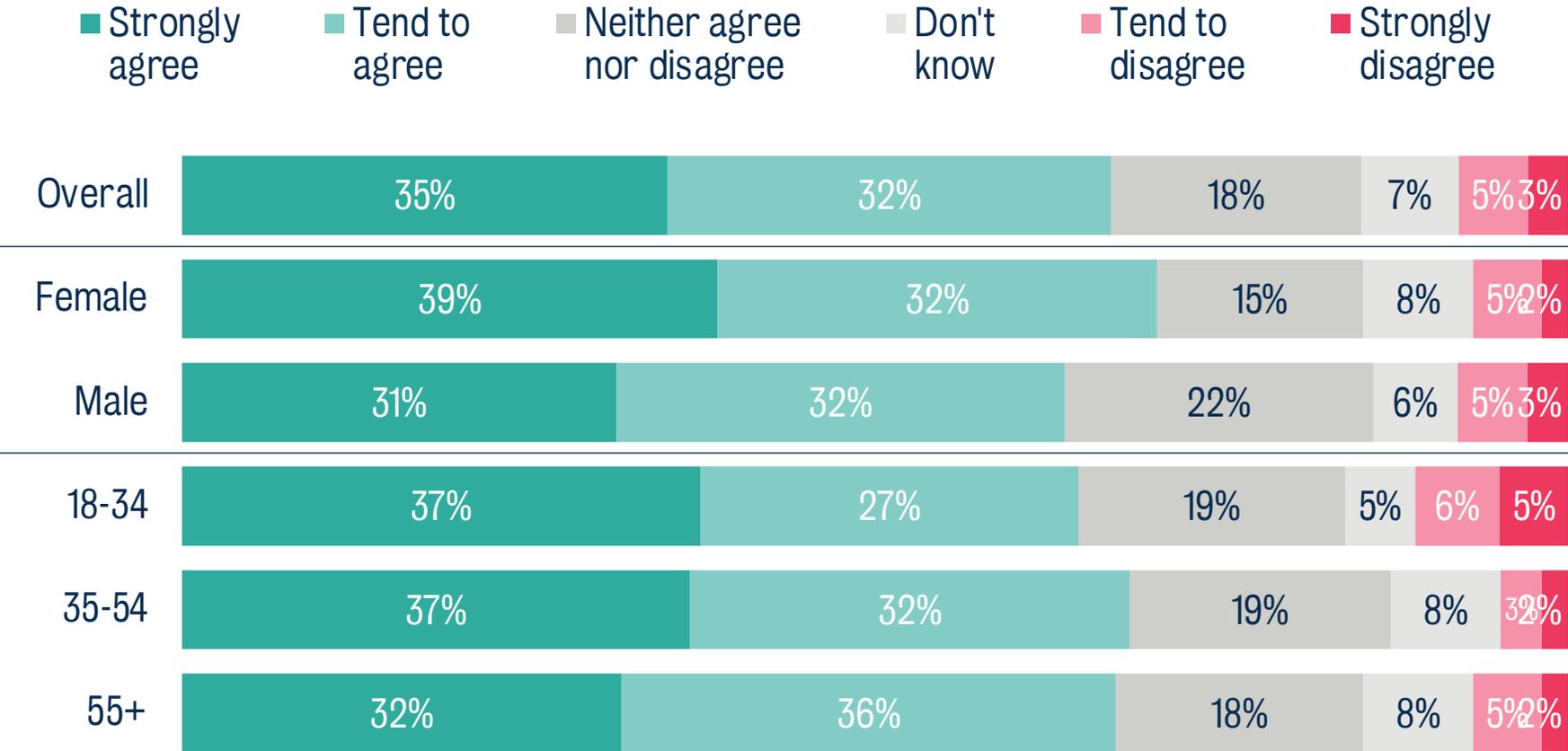


There are more urgent priorities for the health care system than improving the life expectancy of people with severe mental illness



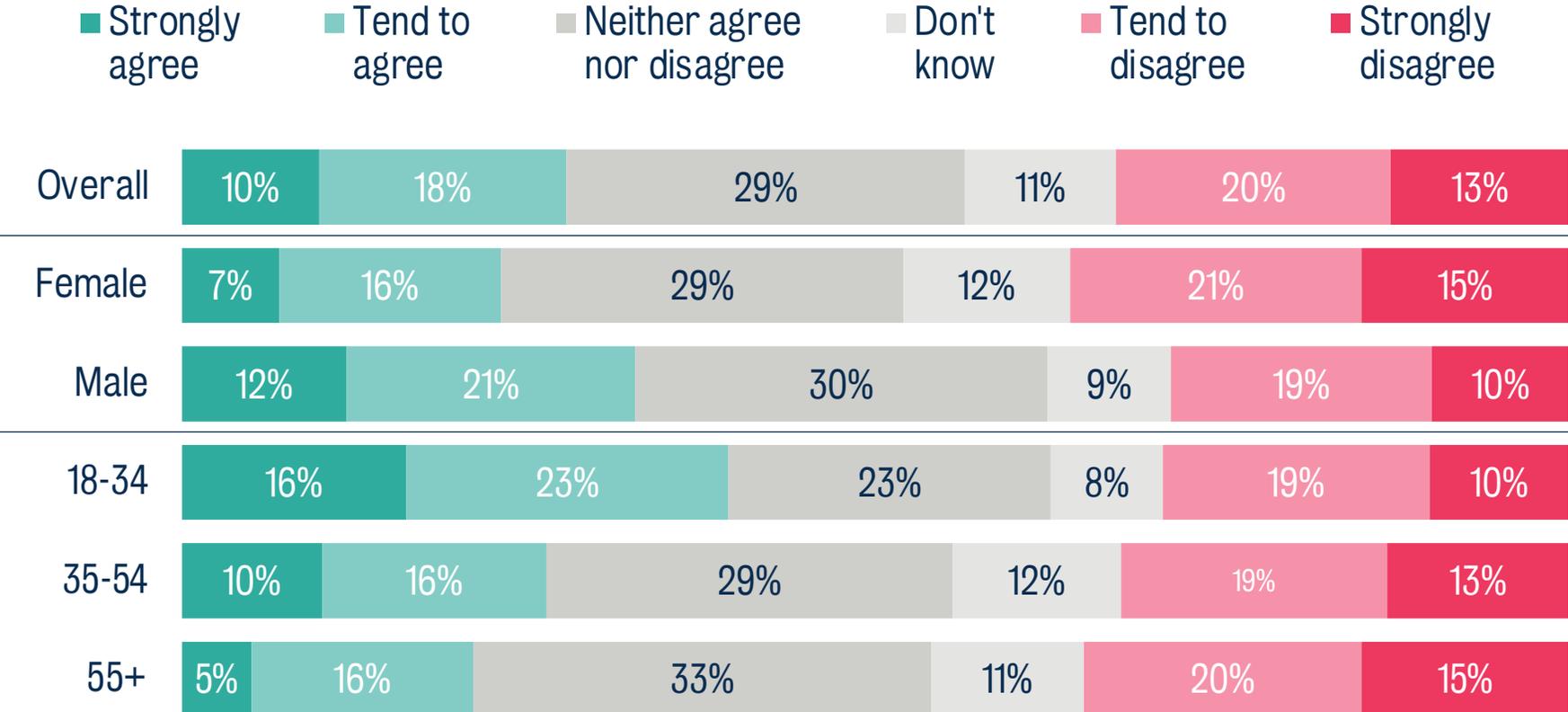
Most people, across demographics, agree that we need to provide better healthcare for people with severe mental illness to improve their life expectancy

People with severe mental illness on average have a life expectancy 15-20 years shorter than the average person due to preventable health conditions. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements: **We need to provide better healthcare for people with severe mental illness to improve their life expectancy**



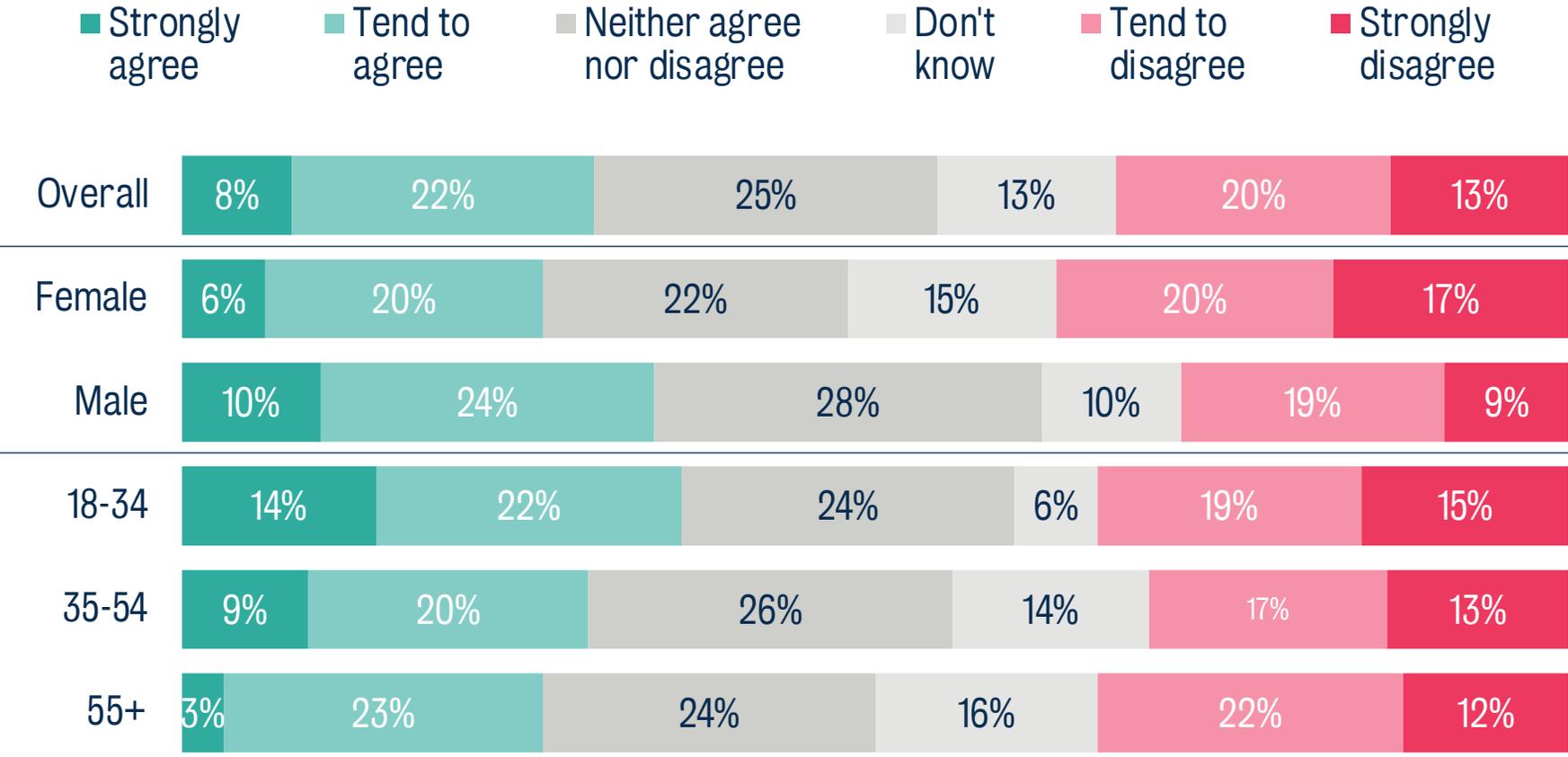
The youngest surveyed are almost twice as likely as the oldest to say there are more urgent priorities for the health care system than improving the life expectancy of people with severe mental illness

People with severe mental illness on average have a life expectancy 15-20 years shorter than the average person due to preventable health conditions. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements: **There are more urgent priorities for the health care system than improving the life expectancy of people with severe mental illness**



The youngest are also more likely to say that providing people with severe mental illness with healthcare to improve their life expectancy is too challenging

People with severe mental illness on average have a life expectancy 15-20 years shorter than the average person due to preventable health conditions. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statements: **It is too challenging to provide people with severe mental illness with the type of healthcare needed to improve their life expectancy**



Sources for average life expectancy of different conditions

- Severe mental illness: [Severe mental illness \(SMI\) and physical health inequalities: briefing - GOV.UK](#)
- Smokers: [Smoking-Statistics-Fact-Sheet.pdf](#)
- Severe Obesity: [Moderate obesity takes years off life expectancy | University of Oxford](#)
- Diabetes: [Cardiovascular Endocrinology & Metabolism](#)
- Multiple Sclerosis: [Life expectancy | MS Trust](#)
- HIV: [Life expectancy after 2015 of adults with HIV on long-term antiretroviral therapy in Europe and North America: a collaborative analysis of cohort studies - The Lancet HIV](#)

