

Women's Health

Overview

Women's health encompasses the physical, mental and social well-being of women across their lifespan. The World Health Organization emphasises that women and girls often face disadvantage due to sociocultural factors, affecting access to care, maternal health, reproductive rights and chronic disease burden.

The field covers reproductive health, pregnancy and childbirth, menstrual health, menopause, mental health, cardiovascular disease (which is the leading cause of death in women globally) and cancers such as cervical and breast cancer.

Causes / Risk Factors

Key risk factors specific to women include:

- Pregnancy and childbirth complications (e.g., pre-eclampsia, hemorrhage) and lack of access to quality maternal care
- Gender-based discrimination, poverty, violence, and limited autonomy in health decisions (Women in many regions have more years in ill-health than men)
- Hormonal changes (menopause) and reproductive history affect disease risk (osteoporosis, cardiovascular)
- Lifestyle factors: obesity, sedentary behaviour, tobacco/alcohol use, diet, which increase cardiovascular/cancer risk

Symptoms / Warning Signs

Symptoms specific to women's health issues may include:

- Irregular or heavy menstrual bleeding, pelvic pain or changes in menstrual cycle (may point to fibroids, endometriosis)
- Changes in breast tissue (lumps, discharge) indicating need for breast examination
- Vaginal bleeding after menopause or persistent pelvic pain (may indicate endometrial or cervical pathology)
- Hot flashes, night sweats, mood changes in menopause
- Noticeable weight gain, breathlessness or chest pain could signify cardiovascular disease in women (sometimes with atypical presentation compared to men)

Prevention / Lifestyle

Preventive actions for women's health include:

- Accessing regular screenings: cervical cancer (HPV testing/Pap smear), breast self-exams/mammography (depending on guidelines)
- Adopting heart-healthy behaviours: balanced diet, physical activity, avoiding tobacco, limiting alcohol. Several studies show many heart attack symptoms present differently in women
- Ensuring quality maternal and reproductive health services: antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, postnatal monitoring
- Promoting bone health from a younger age (calcium/vitamin D, weight-bearing exercise) to reduce osteoporosis risk after menopause

Screening / Diagnosis

Regular checkups and screenings are vital:

- Cervical screening (Pap/HPV) and breast screenings according to national schedules
- Blood pressure, lipid profile, blood glucose screening given cardiovascular risk in women
- Bone density scans after menopause or for high-risk women
- Mental health screening: women are at higher risk of depression/anxiety especially postpartum

Management / Public Health Perspective

Public health strategies for women's health include:

- WHO's "6 priorities for women and health" emphasise maternal care, gender equity, violence prevention, and access to services
- National programmes in many countries include free maternal services, public awareness campaigns for breast/cervical cancer, and subsidised screenings
- Research is advancing in female-specific health issues (e.g., polycystic ovary syndrome, menopause therapies) and inclusion of women in clinical trials
- Addressing social determinants (education, economic empowerment, gender norms) is essential to reduce health inequities

Summary Points

- Women's health covers a broad range of issues from reproduction to chronic diseases
- Screenings and gender-specific care are key to early detection
- Social and behavioural factors significantly influence women's health outcomes

- Public health programmes must address services, equity and research gaps

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