



Mental illness is responsible for approximately 12% of the total disease burden in Victoria. Amongst women, this is predominantly due to depression and anxiety.⁶

Position in society and experiences of living in society can explain the differences in the mental health of women and men.²

Sex differences

There are significant differences in the types of mental illness affecting women and men, and the ways that women and men are prescribed and react to medication.

- The most common mental illnesses experienced by women are depression and anxiety.¹⁶ Both occur more frequently in women than men. Over a 12 month period the prevalence for depression in women is 7% versus 5% in men, and for anxiety 18% versus 11% in men (ABS 2007).
- Between 3% and 8% of women experience severe and disabling mood disturbance known as premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) premenstrually.⁷
- Up to 15% of women develop a depressive disorder following childbirth.¹⁴
- Women are two times as likely to experience depression during transition to menopause compared with when premenopausal.^{9,4}
- In women, depression is more likely to be accompanied by anxiety disorders.¹¹
- Deliberate self harm is common in adolescents; more so in young women than young men.⁵

- Eating disorders are 10 times more common in women than men.⁸
- Drug trials often exclude women, so when given medications based on knowledge gained from trials on men, women often receive larger doses than are needed.¹²

Gender influences

Women are exposed to a wide range of specific factors that can increase their risk of poor mental health.²

- Women are at higher risk of developing co-morbidities when these risk factors occur together.¹⁵
- Women are affected unduly by the burden of poverty, and this influences their likelihood of suffering depression.²
- Emotionally supportive relationships and social networks are more valuable for reducing the risk of major depressions in women than in men.¹⁰
- Lesbian and bisexual women report worse mental health than other women¹⁹ and Indigenous Australian women commit suicide at nearly twice the rate of non-Indigenous Australian women.¹²
- Psychiatric illness is the leading cause of maternal death in Australia.³
- Suicide is the leading cause of avoidable mortality for women aged 25-44 years in Victoria.¹⁷
- One woman in three reports having one or more unwanted sexual experiences before age 16 years.¹
- Women are much more likely than men to experience violence. Depression in adult women is between three and four times higher if they have experienced sexual abuse as children, or partner violence as adults.²
- Women are more likely to work in jobs that are unstable and of low status² and to take on the unpaid role of carer.¹⁵
- Traditional roles expose women to higher stress and make it more difficult for them to change their stressful situations.²⁰
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and refugee women are more likely to be over represented in crisis mental health services and experience significant barriers to accessing services.
- Women are more likely to be diagnosed as depressed than men with the same symptoms², and are also more likely to be prescribed anti-depressant medication than men with the same diagnosis.¹⁸

- Hospital settings for the treatment of mental illness can be very threatening due to the high ratio of men to women. This puts hospitalised women at high risk of physical and sexual assault, threat and loss of privacy.^{12,13}

Implications for the future

Women's mental health outcomes could be improved by addressing the risk factors that specifically impact on women at an individual and societal level.²

- **Evidence on the impacts of gender and mental health focuses mainly on the differences in frequency of mental illnesses. In the future, research, contributing factors, outcomes, health seeking behaviours, and the response of health services need to be addressed separately for women and men¹⁵ and incorporate women's voices.**
- There is a need for treatment facilities and services to be tailored for the different and specific needs according to gender.¹²
- **There needs to be research with specific groups of women that are over represented such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, refugee women, women with disabilities, and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.**

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