

# Women and sexual and reproductive health

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**Sexual and reproductive health is more than the absence of disease, it is about:**

- Meaningful relationships
- An appreciation of our bodies
- Respectful and appropriate interactions with both genders
- The ability to express love, affection and intimacy
- A safe and satisfying sex life
- The capacity to reproduce and the freedom to choose whether, when and how often to reproduce
- Access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of contraception and fertility regulation (including safe abortion)
- Access to appropriate health services. <sup>7,11</sup>

Sexual and reproductive health is therefore closely linked to social influences, such as income, housing, employment and social connectedness. It is also linked to culture, language and the ability to access and use health information and services.

Today, Australian women are having fewer babies and at a later age than they were forty years ago. Yet both women (and men) are starting their sexual relationships at younger ages than in the past (median age 16), so there is a longer phase of sexual activity prior to the first baby. <sup>10</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are having babies at a younger age than non-Aboriginal women but generally with more complications. <sup>2</sup>

## Sex differences

**For women, sexual and reproductive health issues present very differently than those of men.**

- Although chlamydia often has no symptoms in women, it can have long term impacts on their health, including infertility, ectopic pregnancy and chronic pelvic pain. <sup>3,1</sup>
- 3.1% of Australian women aged 16-59 reported having been diagnosed with chlamydia and 2.3% with pelvic inflammatory disease. <sup>8</sup>
- In the same study 15.5% reported having had difficulty becoming pregnant and 22.6% had had a termination of pregnancy. Many still had several reproductive years ahead of them. <sup>13</sup>
- Nearly a third of Australian women will experience abortion in their lifetime. <sup>4</sup>
- About 15% of HIV notifications are in women. HIV may be transmitted to a fetus during pregnancy or to the infant by breastfeeding. <sup>1</sup>

## Gender influences

**Women are exposed to different social pressures than men; this can increase their risk of experiencing poor sexual and reproductive health.**

- Among school students rates of binge drinking are higher among young women (68%) than young

men (57%), with 20.2% of men and 33.7% women reporting being drunk or high at their most recent sexual encounter and 9% of women and 6% of men experiencing unwanted sex. <sup>12</sup>

- Over 80% of chlamydia cases nationally in 2008 were in young people under 29 years of age, with notifications more common among women than men. <sup>1</sup>
- Women usually bear the primary responsibility for contraception.
- **One in five women has been coerced into unwanted sex, and because of this is more likely to experience psychological distress.** <sup>6</sup>
- Lack of access to public abortion services in Victoria further impedes women's control over their reproductive health, particularly in rural and regional areas. <sup>14</sup>

**“Teenage mothers are more likely to live in areas of disadvantage, be single, be unaware of the gestation of their pregnancy, experience higher levels of psychological distress, engage in substance abuse and endure domestic violence, poverty, children in care, educational problems, be out of education, experience sexual abuse, mental health problems, be themselves the children of teenage mothers, have greater exposure to crime, and be ignorant about sex.”**

The Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young Victorians <sup>7</sup>

- Women living in rural areas often experience difficulty accessing services, pay more for services and are concerned about confidentiality and a lack of appropriate services.<sup>15,16,17</sup>
- Women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds are less likely to use health services than women born in Australia.<sup>16</sup>

## Implications for the future

**Women need the capacity to find, understand and use health information and services.**

- Women need access to all sexual and reproductive health options, as well as a maximum choice of services, and need to be supported in their decisions.
- Policy will be more effective if it recognises that sexual and reproductive health is interlinked with many other aspects of health - particularly mental health - and contributes to the overall health and wellbeing of the individual.
- A coordinated approach to sexual and reproductive health education is needed in schools and the community
- Health services can be opportunistic in promoting sexual and reproductive health as well as being responsive to women who are potentially vulnerable as women access health services throughout their lifespan.

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