



BPW CANADA COMMITTEE MEMBERS HEALTH REPORT

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1. Fibromyelgia 2. Eating Disorders 3. Chronic Fatigue

Women's Health, Women's Lives

The United Nations Platform for Action arising from the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in September 1995 recognized that:

Health is a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Women's health involves their emotional, social and physical well-being and is determined by the social, political and economic context of their lives, as well as by biology.

The United Nations' definition of women's health inextricably links women's health to the context of women's lives. Women are situated differently than men, socially, politically and economically which, in turn, affects health. Researchers have argued that gendered differences in access to resources and opportunities tend to disadvantage girls and women disproportionately such that they experience various forms of social exclusion arising from poverty, social and geographic isolation, discrimination and disability (WHO 1998).

The resulting marginalization of girls and women with respect to opportunities for full participation in social life and the associated limits on education, employment and lifetime income and security have implications for health. "To be included is to be accepted and to be able to participate fully within our families, our communities and our society. Those who are excluded, whether because of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment or under-employment, geographic remoteness, ill-health, gender, race, or lack of education, do not have the opportunity for full participation in the economic and social benefits of society" (Guildford 2002, p. 3). Therefore, Health Canada (1999) includes gender in its list of the determinants of health, arguing that it has a powerful effect on health, alone or in concert with the other determinants of health:

- Biology and genetic endowment;
- Healthy child development;
- Personal health practices and coping skills;
- Culture;
- Social support networks;
- Physical and social environments; and
- Income and social status;

Paying special attention to women's health is important because gender is a determinant of health. Women not only have a different physical makeup from men, they have different life experiences, such as their roles as mothers and family



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caregivers. They are more likely to have low incomes and low social status and are more often adversely affected by other determinants of health such as the need for social support. Because of a woman's role as family caregiver, her health is important not only for her own sake but also for the sake of her family. (Source: You and Your Health, BC Health Planning, Ministry of Health Planning, Women's and seniors' Health).

The following information discusses these topics but outlines some strategies that hopefully will correct the problems faced by women in all areas of health.

Fibromyalgia is still hard to diagnose and in many of the provinces it seems that many doctors still do not recognize the symptoms as they are often part of other health problems such as Arthritis, Chronic Fatigue and sometimes Carpal tunnel. The following is a statement from a Nurse in the field of Public Health: "Our Healthy Community Committee held an educational session about Fibromyalgia a few years ago. It came to light as an issue as one of the committee members had a difficult time getting diagnosed for fibromyalgia. Eventually his psychiatrist, who he was seeing for depression, diagnosed him.... he had had a lot of pain, couldn't sleep, and then gradually felt depressed as he was so tired. ". Typically women are more affected by fibromyalgia than men.

Eating Disorders is often still seen and captioned under mental illness. Thus when being treated, victims of this disorder are often placed in lockdown wards of hospitals. Some real strides forward has been made in this area as provincial governments are funding programs for rehabilitation of victims of this problem. Although teenage girls are particularly at risk, more and more middle age women are struggling with this problem. Manitoba Health is committed to the prevention early detection and treatment of Eating Disorders, (Women's Directorate newsletter). Programs such as Healthy Child, Healthy Lifestyles and Chronic Disease Prevention funded by both levels of government address nutrition, healthy meal planning and healthy diets for all ages, and more activity. Obesity is a huge problem in Canada, and so the above programs address issues that lead up to this and they are aimed at everyone, but especially those in low income and social assistance situations to educate them on how to shop and prepare food economically as well as activities you can do to keep fit and healthy. Female led families are often the ones that are in lower income situations so it is important to follow these programs to see what difference they make.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: This is another problem that is also hard to diagnose and more so with women although more women seem to have this than men.

The following information has been taken from government websites and hopefully these strategies will correct the problems women are having with the above illnesses others.



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“A project focusing on gender and health planning, in partnership with the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence shows that Women's health issues are different. In addition to obvious issues related to reproductive health, women also face an increased rate of chronic illnesses as they age, as well as higher rates of mental illness such as depression. Women experience diseases and illnesses, such as heart disease and stroke, differently from men. Only five per cent of Canadian research funding deals exclusively with women's health issues. Issues of violence, poor economic status and lower incomes affect more women than men. Attention to specific health issues for women assists policy makers, health care providers, and women themselves to appropriately address the health needs of women as they differ between women and men, and among women themselves. No two women are alike, and differences of socio-economic status, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, geography etc., affect their health in different ways. It is for this reason that it is important to raise awareness of the specific issues which affect their lives.

Health Canada developed the Women's Health Strategy (www.hc-sc.gc.ca) in order to identify and address these issues, and to ensure that women and women's health issues are given full consideration in all of our areas of responsibility. **The Women's Health Strategy** recognizes the distinct health needs of women in the planning, implementation and delivery of health care services, and seeks to ensure awareness and responsiveness to gender differences in all aspects of health care delivery in Manitoba. Two of their goals are: To promote a wellness model based on adequate public education and prevention of disease, in addition to the existing treatment model and resources allocated for research must reflect an equitable distribution between the specific health concerns of women and men.

Identifying gender as a determinant of health – along with income, education, social support and other health determinants – is an important step in recognizing that the health needs of women and men are different.

In 2000, 70 per cent of all persons aged 85 or over were female (Health Canada, 2001b). While women live longer than men, they are more likely to suffer from long-term activity limitations and chronic conditions such as osteoporosis, arthritis and migraine headaches (Federal, Provincial and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health, 1999).

The first of the Federal Plan's eight objectives made a commitment to government-wide implementation of gender-based analysis in the development of policies, programs and legislation. Chapter 3 of the Federal Plan, "Improving the Health and Well-being of Women," discussed issues pertinent to the health situation of women in Canada and committed to the implementation of a women's health strategy.



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Gender Inclusive Health Training

The BC government is managing a project for gender inclusive health training to promote the awareness of sex differences and gender influences in health care practice and policy. Training will be directed to two distinct groups – front-line workers in health care settings and health planners. In conjunction with research, evaluation and policy initiatives, the Provincial Women's Health Network and Gender Inclusive Health Training will contribute a solid base for advancing and measuring progress in women's health. New mechanisms and training programs will need to be developed over the next 10 years to meet the goal of advancing the health of women and girls in British Columbia. (Source: October 2004, BC Women's Hospital & Health Centre and British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health)

The Canadian Women's Health Network

CWHN) represents more than 70 organizations from all provinces and territories. CWHN supports communications activities of the Centres of Excellence for Women's Health and other WHCP initiatives, and is the women's health affiliate of the Canadian Health Network, a nationally funded Internet-based service designed to improve access to accurate and reliable health information.

(The health sector is slowly recognizing the extent of anatomical and physiological differences between males and females and incorporating these differences in science and treatment (e.g., in recognizing and treating heart disease and in understanding the different effects of anaesthetics) (Health Canada, 2000b).

Health Canada recognizes the diversity of women's health needs over their life span. Our department is committed to helping women maintain and improve their health as well as understanding conditions and diseases that are unique to and more prevalent in women, affect women differently and are becoming more common for women and why they occur.

Health Canada's belief is that our health system must address the needs of women and men differently, and correct past imbalances. “