

Men's health

Australian men are more likely than Australian women to get sick from serious health problems. Their mortality rate is also much higher. Men die in greater numbers than women from almost every non-sex-specific health problem. Overall, for every two women who die, three men die.

This figure holds true among children too. In deaths due to accidents or drowning, boys account for two out of three deaths.

Male deaths outnumber female deaths in every age group apart from the over-65 years, and only because so many men die before reaching retirement. Compared to women, men visit the doctor less frequently, have shorter visits and only attend when their illness is in its later stages.

High-risk groups

Australia ranks high in life expectancy rates. Only three other countries – Iceland, Japan and Hong Kong – have higher life expectancy rates for men. However, Australian men don't live as long as Australian women. On average, Australian men can expect to live 79 years, compared to women who can expect to live 84 years.

Certain male population groups in Australia have a lower life expectancy than 79 years, including:

- Australian Aborigine and Torres Strait Islander men
- Migrant men
- Men who live in rural and remote areas of Australia
- Socially disadvantaged men
- Men with disabilities
- Men who are in prison
- Non-heterosexual men, including gay, bisexual and transgender males
- Intersex people.

Top 10 causes of premature death in men

According to data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2008, the leading causes of death for Australian men include, in order from first to last:

- Ischaemic heart disease
- Trachea and lung cancer
- Strokes
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases
- Prostate cancer
- Dementia and Alzheimer's disease
- Colon and rectum cancer
- Blood and lymph cancer, including leukaemia
- Diabetes
- Suicide.

Some deaths are more likely for men than women

Some causes of death are related to sex (or gender). For example, a man cannot die during childbirth, because only women have babies. Similarly, a woman cannot die from prostate cancer, because only men have a prostate gland.

However, according to 2008 data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, men outnumber women in many causes of non-sex-related deaths. For example:

- Suicide – 78 per cent of deaths are male
- Trachea and lung cancers – 63 per cent of deaths are male
- Blood and lymph cancers (including leukaemia) – 57 per cent of deaths are male
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases – 54 per cent of deaths are male
- Colon and rectum cancers – 54 per cent of deaths are male
- Ischaemic heart disease – 53 per cent of deaths are male.

A range of theories

It is clear that women are healthier than men, but why? Some of the theories that attempt to explain the health differences between the sexes include:

- In Australia, more money is spent on the healthcare needs of women and children than is spent on the healthcare needs of men. The healthcare system reflects this bias. For example, the waiting room of most medical clinics has women's magazines and children's toys. This subtly suggests that men aren't as welcome.
- Men are more likely than are women to work full-time. Office hours for most medical clinics coincide with typical work hours, so men in full-time employment find it difficult to make an appointment. (Of course, this is also true for women who work full-time.)
- Men, particularly older men, typically prefer to see a male doctor for intimate or embarrassing issues. However, the family doctor may be female.
- Men are traditionally encouraged to do the high-risk jobs that are stressful, dangerous and deadly such as mining, logging and construction.
- Men are encouraged by our culture to be tough and independent. Some men could believe that visiting doctors or complaining of feeling ill are threats to their masculinity.

'Macho' men

Men in Western societies such as Australia are less inclined than women to take an active role in maintaining their health. They are also less likely to seek professional help for problems, particularly those of an emotional nature. Some of the social and cultural reasons for this include:

- The Western definition of masculinity includes strength and silence. Men may feel that it is a sign of weakness or 'femininity' to seek help.
- Males, particularly teenagers, tend to act as if they are invulnerable. This can lead to destructive behaviours such as drug or alcohol binges, or reckless driving.
- Women are more likely to have regular contact with doctors because of reproductive issues such as menstrual periods, contraception and pregnancy. Men don't have a similar reason that requires them to regularly see a doctor.

Socioeconomic status

The 'macho' theory proposes that men may start looking after themselves if they stopped behaving like tough guys. However, some researchers believe that blaming cultural constructs of masculinity is a way of passing the buck. Bad health may be the fault of the social environment in which the men live. It has been well documented around the world that poverty breeds disease.

The importance of employment

Many researchers have demonstrated the direct link between employment status and men's health. Issues include:

- A man's self-esteem is closely linked to his role as breadwinner. Unlike women, men aren't as strongly encouraged to find self-worth in the roles of parent and homemaker.
- Unemployment puts great financial and emotional strain on a family. The man, as breadwinner, may feel burdened with guilt and shame.
- Men without trades who go from one unskilled job to another are more likely to feel devastated by periods of unemployment.
- Men who feel in control of their lives are more likely to look after their health. Men who are unemployed often feel helpless.

Male depression

One out of every six Australian men suffers from depression at any given time. Statistics include:

- Teenagers and the elderly are particularly at risk.
- Male depression is associated with an increased risk of health disorders such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.
- Men are likely to resort to destructive behaviours in an attempt to deal with depression.
- Depressed men are twice as likely as depressed women to abuse alcohol and drugs. Men often try to manage their symptoms of depression by using alcohol and other drugs, which make the symptoms worse.
- Depression is a known high-risk factor for suicide. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, men of all ages suicide at a higher rate than women.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Men's health clinic
- Australian Men's Shed Association Tel. 1300 550 009

Things to remember

- Australian men are more likely to get sick from serious health problems than Australian women.
- Men die in greater numbers than women from almost every non-sex-specific health problem.
- Compared to women, men visit the doctor less frequently, have shorter visits, and only attend when their illness is in its later stages.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Centre for Advancement of Men's Health

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