

Health Journey

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Editor's view

As we progress through life, our physical and mental health needs change. While many of us see the value in safeguarding our physical wellbeing – and take steps to maintain a healthy weight, have regular health and skin check-ups, keep an eye on our blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels, and deal with illness or injury – far fewer women realise how important it is to look after our mental and emotional health as we age.

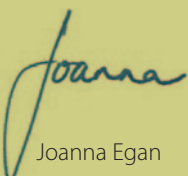
In this issue of *Health Journey*, we discuss how women can encourage mental wellbeing. By making simple, healthy life choices, we can put ourselves in good stead to be able to overcome the challenges life inevitably throws our way.

Our vulnerability to mental health issues changes over time. For young women, body image disorders are a major concern. They can lead to the development of eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, self-harm and suicide. During pregnancy and after childbirth, women are more susceptible to anxiety- and depression-related disorders. Women are most vulnerable during mid-life. At this time, major life changes such as menopause, divorce, involuntary unemployment, retirement and issues relating to age (for example, the birth of grandchildren), have a significant impact on emotional wellbeing. Later in life, women face potential social isolation and its impacts, and can experience emotional hardships in coming to terms with physical illness and disability.

In total, about 43 per cent of all Australian women are affected by mental health issues at some point during their lives. To raise public mental-health awareness and work towards eliminating the stigma of mental illness, many organisations throughout Queensland will celebrate World Mental Health Day on Wednesday 10 October. Others will take part in Mental Health Week from 7-14 October, or become involved in Postnatal Depression Awareness Week from 18-24 November.

This spring, the team at Women's Health will be continuing our mental health awareness and prevention work for expectant and new mums. We are running a series of Looking After You seminars to provide women with the knowledge and skills they need to look after their physical and mental wellbeing during pregnancy and after childbirth. We will also mark Postnatal Depression Awareness Week by inviting new mums and their bubs to join us for a pram walk and picnic at Roma Street Parklands in Brisbane on Friday 23 November.

For details, visit our website at www.womhealth.org.au or check out our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/WomensHealthQldWide.


Joanna Egan



About us

Women's Health Queensland Wide Inc (Women's Health) is a not for profit, health promotion, information and education service for women and health professionals throughout Queensland. Services include:

- **Health Information Line**
A free information and referral service for Queensland women
- **Health information** and free lending library via www.womhealth.org.au
- **Health education** for community and health professionals

Mon | Tues | Thur | Fri **9.00am- 5.00pm**
Wed **12.30pm- 5.00pm**

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Safe sex: an age-old dilemma

- Although they're easily preventable, sexually
- transmitted infections are on the rise and
- young people aren't the only ones at risk.

In the past decade, rates of sexually transmissible infections (STIs) have surged in Australia. The infections, which are spread via skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity or by the exchange of bodily fluids (see box), predominantly affect teenagers and young adults – three-quarters of all reported cases occur in people aged from 15 to 29. However, recent figures indicate older Australians are becoming increasingly at risk.

Between 2004 and 2010, reported cases of chlamydia more than doubled in women aged between 40 and 64, and diagnoses of genital warts and genital herpes increased. While these trends could partly be attributed to more people being tested, they nevertheless confirm that STIs are a major public health issue in Australia. Chlamydia has reached epidemic levels – national infection rates have more than tripled since 2001, with the highest rates of diagnosis consistently being recorded in Queensland. In 2010 alone, almost 20,000 Queenslanders were diagnosed with the infection and 14 of these were aged 85 and older.

Why are STI rates increasing in older people?

Social shifts - Increased longevity, coupled with higher rates of divorce, mean people are living longer, healthier lives and many are becoming single and seeking new sexual partners later in life. Internet dating, improved long-distance travel and pharmaceutical aids for sexual function (such as hormone-replacement and erectile-dysfunction medications) have made it easier for people to start new sexual relationships, regardless of their age. However, older people are often overlooked when it comes to STI prevention, care and treatment services. Many received limited sexual-health education in their youths and because today's campaigns exclusively target teenagers and young adults, their awareness of safe-sex practices is lacking.

Risky sexual behaviours – Research suggests older people are less likely than young people to use a condom, female condom (a latex sheath that fits loosely inside the vagina) or dam (a thin sheet of latex placed over the vulval or anal area during oral sex). Many women may view condoms primarily as a form of birth control, so when they are no longer concerned about becoming pregnant, they may not insist on their use. Other women may find it challenging to introduce the topic of condoms to a new sexual partner; they may feel that raising the topic of condoms could lead to rejection; or they may feel nervous about negotiating condom usage for the first time in many years. Some older couples may also experience fears about condom use exacerbating erectile dysfunction.

Biological factors – As women age, their susceptibility to contracting an STI can increase. Not only does the immune system naturally become less effective with age, but physiological changes that can make women more vulnerable to infections occur during menopause. For example, decreased lubrication and the thinning of vaginal tissue can increase the risk of micro-tears during sex, allowing

easier transmission of bacteria and viruses. The symptoms of some STIs, such as vaginal soreness and irregular bleeding, may also be mistaken as normal signs of ageing, which can delay detection and treatment, and potentially increase the spread, of the infection.

How can women protect themselves?

Many older women are reluctant to seek information about safe-sex practices from their doctor because they either feel they should already possess the knowledge or they fear being judged. However, it is important for women to have regular sexual check-ups and learn about safe-sex practices. A check-up can be performed by a doctor, or at a sexual health or family planning clinic. Barrier protection (condoms and dams) should always be negotiated when having sex with a new or casual partner, or with a partner whose previous sexual habits are unknown. Keeping condoms/dams in a convenient location and discussing their use prior to sexual activity can make it easier to use them.

For more information read our *Chlamydia and Thrush and other vaginal infections* fact sheets at www.womhealth.org.au, or to find out more about condoms, female condoms and dams, visit Family Planning Queensland at www.fpq.com.au.

What are STIs?

STIs are infections caused by bacteria, viruses and parasites. They are spread via the exchange of body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal secretions and saliva, or through skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. STIs include chlamydia, genital herpes, HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and HPV (human papillomavirus).

Since many people experience no obvious symptoms, it is possible to have an STI and not realise it, or to be infected from somebody who seems perfectly healthy. If symptoms occur they can include itchy genitals, pain or swelling; a burning sensation during urination; a rash; open sores or small lumps in the genital area; unusual vaginal bleeding; unusual genital or anal discharge; pain during sex; a sore throat; swollen glands; fever and body aches; unexplained fatigue; night sweats; and weight loss.

Women should be tested for STIs regularly, particularly if they have engaged in unsafe sexual activity, sexual activity with a new partner or with a partner who may have other partners. While many STIs are curable, if left undetected and untreated, they can lead to serious health complications including genital, heart and brain damage; pelvic inflammatory disease; ectopic pregnancy; infertility; chronic abdominal pain; cirrhosis; cancer; and an increased susceptibility to other infections such as tuberculosis and meningitis.

Health benefits of social media

- Concerns about the negative impacts of social media have dominated public debate however recent studies show there are clear health benefits to being online and connected.

New technologies are changing the way we communicate. Social media (including email, blogs, online forums and social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Flickr, Youtube and LinkedIn) allow us to share information and connect with other people despite geographic and physical barriers.

Australians are embracing these technologies with gusto. More than 62 per cent of us regularly visit social media sites, and Australians under the age of 25 are ranked as the world's most prolific users – about 97 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds regularly login to update their profiles, post messages and make comments.

Despite these trends, recent public debate has tended to focus on the risks of social media. These include cyber-bullying, threats from sexual predators, the mismanagement of personal information, the negative impact inappropriate posts and photos can have in the future, and the emphasis some sites place on friend counts, which can lead to popularity contests, low-self esteem, anxiety and depression. Social media have also been criticised for encouraging sedentary behaviour and compromising the development and maintenance of friendships made during face-to-face interactions. Despite these issues, research shows social media offer users a number of clear health benefits.

How do social media encourage health and wellbeing?

1. They facilitate social interaction

It is widely known that having regular, positive social interaction encourages health and wellbeing. Social media can help users strengthen their existing friendships and encourage the development of new, online relationships. In the past, these were considered weaker than traditional face-to-face friendships however current research shows they can be important forms of socialisation, particularly for individuals who are more vulnerable to isolation such as new mums, elderly people, and people with chronic illnesses or disabilities.

Australian researchers recently examined social media's potential for overcoming isolation in people aged in their 80s and 90s. Social isolation can lead to a range of physical and mental health problems and has become a major health concern for elderly people, many of whom have limited social contact due to the absence of family or friends, or due to health problems and frailty, which can restrict their opportunities for interaction. The study involved a group of participants and their carers using a purpose-built online application to exchange photographs and messages. After ten weeks of using the application, participants felt more connected and less isolated. They developed a shared language, which encouraged feelings of belonging and inclusion.

2. They build communities

Social media can foster a strong sense of community among users. Online forums and content-sharing sites connect people with shared interests and can be a valuable source of support, particularly for people who feel dissociated due to illness or health conditions. Logging in to an online community to discuss symptoms and treatments, share anecdotal accounts or seek advice and support from others can be important. It can encourage feelings of belonging and acceptance, and this, in turn, can promote resilience, which can help users cope with stressful situations in their daily lives.

An online community for parents of multiple births, for example, is currently providing support to more than 500 Queensland mothers. The community was set up as a Facebook page by Brisbane-based mother of twins Melissa Kirkwood, and has become a place where mothers can share advice and offload their stresses to other parents who understand their experience.

Online networking sites benefit people who encounter practical difficulties communicating in a face-to-face environment. Children with serious illnesses, chronic health conditions or disabilities, for example, often experience disruptions in their everyday lives due to time spent in hospital or away from school. This can upset their social routines and affect their emotional wellbeing. As a response to this, the Starlight Children's Foundation established *Livewire*, a health-networking site for young people (aged from 11 to 20) with serious illnesses or disabilities, and their families. The site is a safe online space where members can connect, share experiences and interact. The site is closely monitored by doctors, who recommend websites for information about particular conditions, and online conversation is moderated. Research shows that children who use the site receive more social support, are more resilient and feel an increased sense of belonging to a community than children who don't participate. They have increased illness-specific knowledge and reduced levels of loneliness and depression.

3. They normalise help-seeking behaviour

Often people are reluctant to talk to their families or friends about their health concerns. Because many of the traditional barriers to seeking help are reduced in an online setting, we're increasingly turning to the internet for health advice. Young people in particular are likely to look online for information about topics such as acne treatments, menstruation facts, contraception advice and discussions about sexual or mental health, before they speak to a GP or counsellor. Although this can be risky because there is a lot of inaccurate, unhealthy or intolerant information online (see page 7, *Managing the risks*), it can also be empowering and can allow us to feel in control of the health choices we make.

Online youth mental health service, *ReachOut.com*, encourages people aged from 15 to 24 to use web-based technologies to take control of their mental health and wellbeing. The health-networking site comprises a chat room and an information bank that is made up of fact sheets and multimedia resources such as videos, podcasts and interviews. It includes an anonymous forum where young people can connect, share their stories and experiences and offer each other strategies for overcoming difficult life situations. It allows



them to sign up for an SMS service so they can receive daily advice and motivational messages, and aims to provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to manage their own health. The service reduces barriers to help seeking by providing information, support and a referral service, and by building young people's confidence to vocalise their problems.

4. They inspire healthy lifestyle changes

Many people use social media as a motivational tool to help them achieve health goals such as quitting smoking, lowering their blood pressure or cholesterol, losing weight or starting an exercise plan. By announcing a goal via social media, and then posting regular updates, people become accountable to others and are more likely to achieve what they set out to do. Sharing their progress with a network of support people who provide feedback and encouragement can help people stay focused. It also allows them to inspire others with their experiences, which can create a culture of healthy living.

Health promotion experts in South Australia are working towards using social media to foster an anti-smoking culture among young people. They are developing an evidence-based website that will feature facts about smoking and the tobacco industry, where teenagers will be given the opportunity to ask questions and engage in online discussions. Participants' comments will be posted on social media sites for their peers to view, and visitors to the website will be encouraged to use Facebook and Twitter to declare they don't smoke and won't date anyone who smokes. Researchers anticipate the campaign will promote an anti-smoking culture that uses peer pressure to stop teenagers from taking up smoking.

5. They aid medical research

Medical professionals use social-networking sites to collect data and recruit participants for health studies. In recent years, young women have been underrepresented in comprehensive, population-based health studies because it is difficult to maintain contact with them using traditional methods. This makes their recruitment into studies difficult, and lowers their retention rates. Researchers recently identified social media as an effective tool for engaging young women in health research.

A study measuring the effectiveness of the comprehensive Australian human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine program was recently conducted in Victoria. The recruitment strategy involved targeted advertising on Facebook, where females aged from 18 to 25 were invited to sign up. On the study's Facebook page, potential participants could click on a link that would direct them to a secure website where they could confidentially express their interest. More than 95 per cent of the study's participants were recruited this way. The women were asked to complete an online questionnaire and self-collect a vaginal swab so their suitability for the study could be assessed. The benefit of this recruitment strategy was two-fold: social media provided an effective means of reaching the target demographic, and it meant the costs involved in advertising the study and recruiting participants were reduced.

Women's Health provides health information to women through a number of communities at www.healthshare.com.au and through our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/WomensHealthQldWide.

Managing online risks

It is important to protect yourself from online threats and develop the skills to critically analyse online content. You should avoid uploading personal information that can identify you in the real world and remember that online information is not an alternative to face-to-face medical consultation. When searching for information online, users should look for evidence-based, unbiased resources produced by credible organisations. When seeking information or joining online support communities, it is advisable to steer clear of un-moderated forums and instead look for discussion groups that are run with the input of health professionals. Look for sites with HONcode certification – this means they follow an ethical code and deliver objective, transparent information.

How to: Keep mentally fit

- There's a lot more to being healthy than
- being physically in shape.

Generally, when we think about health we think about our bodies. However, mental and social wellbeing are as important as physical health in contributing to our overall condition. A person's mental state affects the way they think, feel and behave. When we are mentally healthy, we can cope with the stresses of daily life. We tend to have healthy social relationships, good self-esteem and the confidence we need to overcome challenging situations. We are interested in the world around us, find meaning and purpose in life and have positive hopes for the future.

When a person experiences mental health issues, on the other hand, they tend to be less able to cope with day-to-day stress. They may have low self-esteem and self-confidence, feel worried or anxious, have difficulty concentrating and be irritable or restless. Their eating or sleeping habits may change, they may lose interest in things they previously enjoyed, and their energy levels may lessen or become unstable.

How can women build their mental fitness?

More than 43 per cent of Australian women will experience a mental health issue, most commonly anxiety or depression, at some point during their lives. However, researchers have found that if women stay physically, socially and mentally **active**; if they **belong** to family, community and social groups; and if they **commit** to personal goals, they can better their chances of staying mentally healthy. By following this 'Act, Belong, Commit' philosophy and learning to respond to stress in positive ways, women can lead happier, healthier lives.

Stress is a normal part of life. When a person is faced with an event or situation that challenges them, their body responds by triggering physical changes, such as increased heart and breathing rates, which heighten alertness and prepare it for quick reactions. At times, however, this natural stress response can overwhelm a person's ability to cope. When the negative effects of stress recur or are ongoing, they can lead to fatigue, exhaustion, a lack of concentration, impaired immunity, an increased risk of high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease, and feelings of anxiety and depression.

A good way for women to control stress is to reflect on what triggers it so they can take steps to reduce it. For example, if finances are a concern, working on a budget can be helpful. If work stress is a problem, avoiding new responsibilities and speaking with the manager about reducing current workloads can help. If a personal relationship is causing anxiety, focusing on communication can be useful. If a woman feels overwhelmed at home, asking her partner or family for more support, or asking a friend to babysit so she can have an afternoon to herself, is a good idea.



Sometimes stressors are unavoidable. In these situations, women can put themselves in the best possible position to cope if they practise the following:

1 Do things they enjoy

Allowing time for relaxation can help keep life balanced and reduce a woman's vulnerability to stress. Going for a walk, having a bath, reading a book, watching a movie, playing with the family pet, or spending time with friends can help women feel good, stay calm and keep mentally healthy.

2 Be social

Spending time with friends, family members and colleagues is important. They are a valuable source of support and when a woman feels worried or overwhelmed, they can help her keep things in perspective. Having regular contact in the local community can also boost a person's health. By joining a sports team, a community garden, a book club or a mothers' group, for example, women can build friendships and engage with people who share their values and interests. This can help them stay connected and feel a sense of belonging.

3 Keep active and eat well

Exercising regularly can increase a person's general energy levels, improve their memory and concentration, reduce anxiety and encourage good sleeping habits. Ideally, women should aim to do about 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity most days of the week (this can be done all at once or in three 10-minute blocks). Women can do this by gradually making changes to their day-to-day lives by walking up the stairs, for example, instead of riding the escalator. Women may find that getting off the bus a stop earlier, or parking the car a few blocks away and covering some of the distance on foot, can help. Hanging the washing on the line instead of putting it in the dryer, or putting the radio on and dancing around the kitchen while the vegetables boil can also help women integrate activity into their daily routine.

Diet can also change the way a person feels. Eating regular, nutritious meals can help keep blood-sugar levels constant, which can play a role in stabilising mood. Women should try to incorporate



Study links meditation to wellbeing

Researchers at the University of Sydney have found that people who meditate regularly are less stressed, have lower rates of depression and are generally healthier than other Australians.

The study, which was published in the *Journal of Evidence-Based Complementary & Alternative Medicine* last year, examined the quality of life and functional health of more than 340 people who had practised 'mental silence' meditation consistently for at least two years. Their results were compared to national norms – collected during the Federal Government's 1995 National Health Survey – to reveal that people who meditate have better health outcomes than those who don't.

Lead researcher Dr Ramesh Manocha suggests meditation can be an effective and inexpensive means of preventing and treating stress. "In Australia, 40 per cent of the population experiences significant stress and the majority seek help from GPs who are often at a loss to know what to recommend that is safe, effective and scientifically evaluated," he says. "Our study clearly shows that meditation is something health professionals can confidently recommend to both prevent and reduce stress."

wholegrains, fresh fruit and vegetables, lean meats, fish and low-fat dairy into their diets. Women should avoid processed foods where possible because these can be high in saturated fats, salt and sugar, and low in essential nutrients, and if they feel particularly anxious, avoiding stimulants such as coffee, tea, cola and energy drinks can help, as these can exacerbate anxiety symptoms.

4 Get enough sleep

When people are well-rested, they tend to make better decisions. If a person doesn't get enough sleep, or sleeps too much, they can become tired and irritable, develop muscle aches and pains, and experience low immunity, low energy levels, poor concentration and longer periods of depression. Women should try to establish a regular sleeping pattern by going to bed at about the same time each night. Getting plenty of fresh air, avoiding napping and doing some physical activity during the day can help people fall asleep more easily. Women should avoid stimulants such as caffeine in the afternoon, and try not to smoke or do vigorous exercise within an hour of going to bed. It's also a good idea to avoid using alcohol to help yourself fall asleep; as it breaks down in the body, it causes people to sleep less deeply and wake frequently.

5 Ask for help

Seeking help early can lead to a quicker recovery. If a woman feels unwell or overwhelmed, she should talk to her doctor straightaway and remember that it's okay to approach somebody else if the first person she speaks to doesn't offer the help she needs. The GP can teach women short-term coping strategies and put them in touch with a counsellor or community mental health service. A number of online mental health services can also provide support and information. Some good websites are listed below.

For more information:

Visit Women's Health online at www.womhealth.org.au for fact sheets, or contact our Health Information Line on 3839 9988 (from within Brisbane) or 1800 017 676 (toll-free outside Brisbane) to speak to one of our nurses and midwives. They can refer you to a GP or counsellor, and can give you current information on Government-subsidised programs.

For up-to-date, evidence-based information about stress, anxiety, depression and related disorders, visit www.beyondblue.org.au; www.mindhealthconnect.org.au; www.moodgym.anu.edu.au; or www.blackdoginstitute.org.au.



From the web

The SCAR Project

www.thescarproject.org

Breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in women aged between 15 and 40 – more than 10,000 women in this group are diagnosed with the disease each year. The SCAR Project features portraits of young breast-cancer survivors, many with their mastectomy scars showing. It is a powerful call to action that aims to increase public awareness, raise funds for research and empower survivors.

Cancer facts and fictions

www.iheard.com.au

There are countless myths and rumours about cancer. Claims about what causes it and tales about how to treat it abound. Backed by Cancer Council Australia, iheard.com.au is a site where anyone can ask a cancer-related question and receive an accurate, evidence-based response from a scientist, a clinical advisor, a researcher or a cancer prevention and support expert.



Ask a Health Question

Our Health Information Line receives calls and emails from women on a broad range of health issues. This regular column features answers to some of the most commonly asked questions.

Q: I would like to know what I can do or take to stop recurring thrush problems.

A: Vaginal thrush is caused by the overgrowth of yeast-like fungi, called *Candida*, that are found naturally in the vagina. Symptoms include vaginal itchiness and redness, a burning sensation during urination, discomfort or pain during sex and the appearance of a thick white or creamy vaginal discharge.

Recurrent thrush occurs when a woman experiences four or more bouts of thrush in a year. There is often no vaginal discharge associated with the condition. Instead, it is characterised by burning sensations on and around the vulva, irritation, swelling, redness and pain. It can lead to vulval fissures (skin splitting) and can make sex intolerable.

Some women are more prone than others to thrush infections. Risk factors include frequent use of panty liners or antibiotics; ongoing corticosteroid (anti-inflammatory steroid) use; diabetes; or a compromised immune system. Some women may also be genetically more vulnerable, or may have a poorer immune response to the infection.

Initial thrush treatments include over-the-counter antifungal creams, pessaries and oral medications. If symptoms do not respond to treatment or recur after treatment, women should see their doctor to confirm symptoms are thrush-related and not caused by another condition, such as bacterial vaginosis, dermatitis, lichen sclerosis, or genital herpes. To confirm thrush, the doctor will take a low vaginal swab and send it away for microscopic examination.

The best treatment choice for recurrent thrush remains unclear. However, women often require oral antifungal medications for up to six months, followed by a lower maintenance dose, before all redness and irritation are resolved. Unfortunately, for many women thrush can return in the months after this treatment is completed, and because oral medications can cause side effects, they may not be suitable for all women.

Antifungal creams may be recommended in addition to oral treatments however they commonly cause secondary irritations and dermatitis, which can worsen discomfort. They should be ceased immediately if symptoms worsen or treatment seems ineffective. If continued when ineffective they can contribute to the incidence of drug-resistant strains. Occasionally, women may require more extreme treatments, such as combined boric acid and antifungal treatments. Women who are very inflamed and irritated may also need a weak steroid ointment initially. All treatments need to be supervised by a doctor.

Women may find relief for vulval discomfort by using salt baths as a soothing alternative to soap or by applying cold compresses, ice or pinetarsol gel to the outside of their genitals. Reducing factors that could make treatment less effective is also worthwhile. Young women who suffer consistent premenstrual episodes of thrush may benefit from changing their contraceptive pill from one high in oestrogen to a progesterone-only dose. Screening for undiagnosed diabetes may also be warranted.

The *Thrush and other vaginal infections* fact sheet can be read at www.womhealth.org.au

call our **Health Information Line**

A free information and referral service for Queensland women

3839 9988
1800 017 676
(toll free outside Brisbane)

Staffed by nurse/midwives