

Young women's health & wellbeing

Fact sheet

October 2017

Girls and boys face different expectations and pressures during adolescence and between the ages of 10 to 20, **young women's experiences and health can differ significantly from male peers**. The most effective way to reduce the risk of poor physical, emotional and mental health outcomes for young women is to **create a more gender equal society for girls to grow up in**.

Physical health

Puberty can change the way young women **feel about their bodies and abilities**, as well as how they are **treated by others**.

More boys than girls report that their **parents let them walk or ride to places**, or visit local parks on their own.

Young women report feeling **concern about the presence of males** when exercising and worry about being **judged, humiliated and harassed**.

Sexual and reproductive health

Many young women regularly experience **heavy bleeding and pain** during their period. **More than a third** have missed school due to a painful period.

Young women are under pressure to remove all pubic, underarm and other body hair in order to conform to **feminine beauty norms**.

Young women who have been exposed to partner violence are more likely to experience **unplanned pregnancy, termination or miscarriage**.

Body image

More than half of Australian girls report that they are **most often valued for their looks**, not their brains and ability.

Body image concerns can also relate to a young person's **gender identity**.

Women with poor body image are less confident in negotiating **safe or pleasurable sex**.

Relationships

Young women aged 18 – 24 experience **significantly higher rates of physical and sexual violence** than women in older age groups.

Young people are more likely to **endorse men dominating decision making** in relationships.

Mental health

During adolescence, young women's **mental health outcomes worsen** compared with young men's.

Young Australian women have consistently reported **'stress'** as one of the top concerns affecting their lives.

Being female and experiencing puberty are **key risk factors** for the onset of an eating disorder.

Rates of depression, anxiety and psychological distress are rising in young women. **Young women are at greater risk** than boys of both self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

A lack of understanding by health professionals and parents, and feelings of shame and guilt, can be **barriers to seeking help**.

Social inclusion

Young women's movement in public spaces and participation outside the home is **restricted by fear** of harassment and violence.

At home, adolescent girls spend **more time on household chores** than their brothers, but receive less pocket money.

Young women with disabilities face dual discrimination on the basis of gender and disability, adversely affecting self-esteem and expectations.

Young Aboriginal women are impacted by compounding experiences of gender inequality, racism and trauma.

Findings

Improving gender equality would lead to improved health outcomes and experiences for young women.

An intersectional approach is required to understand and respond to the experiences of young women. Racism, ableism and homophobia also contribute to uneven health outcomes.

Improving body image by **challenging sexualisation and objectification of women and girls** in media and all aspects of life has the potential to significantly improve young women's wellbeing.

Health professionals, parents and schools all have a role to play in challenging and changing the gender norms and expectations that limit and disadvantage young women.

