



WOMEN'S HEALTH

All around the world, women are known as primary caretakers. They're often seen as the cornerstone of their family's health – caring for, and ensuring their family's overall health and wellness. Therefore, it's safe to say that the health and wellbeing of women is key to the wellbeing of society. Yet, women's symptoms are often misconstrued, with female health problems remaining largely under-researched.

While over the past few years progress has been made to highlight women's health issues through awareness campaigns and the like, there's still a long way to go.

Illnesses that affect women differently than men

While the symptoms may be similar, there are certain illnesses that affect women differently than men.

Heart disease

Cardiovascular disease, better known as heart disease, refers to a group of conditions that affects the heart or circulation.¹⁰ Heart diseases cause conditions that narrow or block the blood vessels, which often lead to heart attacks, anginas, and even stroke.¹⁰

Research done by the Centers for Disease Control shows that heart disease is responsible for almost 30% of deaths in women.¹ A main concern in terms of heart disease is that it leads to premature death and disability, as women are typically around 60-years-old at the time of death.¹

Interestingly, there are some heart attack symptoms that are unique to women, making it difficult to diagnose a woman with heart disease.¹⁵ Since most medical practitioners look for the common symptoms (e.g. chest pain), women are likely to show atypical symptoms such as back pain, shortness of breath, and even indigestion in some cases.¹⁵

Recommended bi-annual screening post-menopause for cardiac risk factors.



EXPERT OPINION

“Lifestyle changes are recommended post-menopause to cope with the increased risk of heart disease. Each week, get at least 150-300 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity or 75-150 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity (or a combination of these). Doing around 300+ minutes of physical activity is ideal. Include yoga, swimming, whole foods plant-based diets as top priority and focus,” says Dr. Sunitha Suresh, Medical Advisor at Cigna.

“In addition, Cigna has a clinical disease management program, where clinicians are available to support you and to help you get your health back on track if you are diagnosed with chronic conditions, like heart disease. Be sure to take advantage of these services available to you through your care plan. No matter where you are based, the clinical team is happy to serve you for a healthy tomorrow,” she adds.

Mental health

Evidence shows that women are more prone to mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression compared to men.^{1,2} Depression in particular is a prominent mental health concern, with suicide being a leading cause of death for women under the age of 60.^{1,2} According to the National Institute of Mental Health, each year about 12 million women are affected by a depressive disorder.^{1,2} While there are still stigmas attached to mental health, more and more is being done globally to shine a spotlight on mental health-related topics and to encourage women (and men) to get the help they need.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is condition that weakens the bones, making them weak and brittle. Common injuries include a broken hip, wrist, or vertebrae. Osteoporosis develops over several years but can be treated with medicines to strengthen the bones.³ It is more common in women than men.⁴ One reason why women are prone to osteoporosis is that they tend to have smaller frames and thinner bones.⁵ The chance of developing osteoporosis increases as women reach menopause. This is because estrogen, a hormone that protects women’s bones, decreases significantly when women reach menopause – causing bone loss.⁵

Recommended screening from age 65. Or, post-menopausal women younger than 65 who are at increased risk of osteoporosis, as determined by a formal clinical risk assessment tool (e.g., FRAX*)

A leading cause of death in women

Cancer

After heart disease, cancer is the second leading cause of death in women. Breast and cervical cancer are the two most common cancers affecting women today.¹ Research shows that each year around half a million of women die from each of these cancers.¹ While the cause of cancer continues to be studied, research shows that women who are over the age of 40, obese or not physically active, with a family history of cancer are at higher risk of developing certain cancers.

Recommended screening age varies depending on the medical condition. However, going for regular screenings is key to detecting the cancer early on, ensuring that women get the treatment they need and can go on to live healthy and active lives.¹

Autoimmune diseases

Autoimmune diseases are conditions where the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy body cells. Around 75% of autoimmune diseases affect women.¹ They refer to a group of disorders where the body’s immune system attacks the body, damaging or destroying tissue in the process.

Arthritis

Arthritis is a musculoskeletal condition that causes pain and inflammation in the joints, with osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and psoriatic arthritis considered the common types of this condition.⁸ While it usually affects adults over the

age of 40, arthritis can occur in adults and children of all ages. It is however more common in women and those who have a family history of arthritis.^{8,9} The most commonly affected joints are those in the hands, hips, knees, and spine.⁹

Recommended screening from age 40 (but can start at any age).

Multiple sclerosis (MS)

While there are dozens of serious disorders in this category, multiple sclerosis is one of the most common. Multiple sclerosis, a lifelong condition that affects the spine and brain, is up to three times more common in women than in men.⁶ With multiple sclerosis, the immune system attacks the protective sheath that covers nerve fibres.⁷ This leads to communication problems between the brain and the rest of the body. Eventually, the disease can cause permanent nerve damage.⁷ Multiple sclerosis is known to reduce the life expectancy of those who have been diagnosed. As autoimmune diseases are still not well understood, it is difficult to outline specific risk factors.^{1,6}

A women's health topic that has been getting more attention in recent years

Fibroids

Fibroids (also known as leiomyomas) are non-cancerous tumors that grow in the wall of the uterus.¹¹ Symptoms include heavy or irregular menstrual bleeding, pelvic pressure, back pain, and frequent urination, which overlap with symptoms of other gynecological conditions, making fibroids extremely challenging to diagnose.^{13,14}

A possible reason for this is that the condition is severely under-research, with a 2019 report placing fibroid research in the bottom 50 of more than 290 funded conditions.¹⁴

Risk factors include:¹¹

- **Age.** Fibroids become more common in women after the age of 30 through to menopause.
- **Family history.** Women with a family history of fibroids increases a woman's risk. If a woman's mother had fibroids, she is about three times more at risk of developing fibroids.
- **Ethnicity.** African-American women are more at risk than white women.
- **Obesity.** Women who are overweight are up to three times more at risk of fibroids.
- **Diet.** High consumption of red meat and pork is linked to a higher risk of fibroids.

Recommended screening from age 35 to 49.

If you've received a severe illness diagnosis and need emotional support, find out more about the **Employee Assistance Program**.

[Go to EAP](#)

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact your HR department. Alternatively, visit www.cignawellbeing.com.

This article was reviewed by Dr. Sunitha Suresh, Medical Advisor and Jeanette Lask, Nurse Case Manager at Cigna.

REFERENCES:

1. Women's Top 5 Health Concerns. WebMD. <https://www.webmd.com/women/features/5-top-female-health-concern>. Accessed April 7, 2022.
2. Ten top issues for women's health. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/ten-top-issues-for-women's-health>. Accessed April 7, 2022.
3. NHS. Osteoporosis. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/osteoporosis>. Accessed August, 25 2021.

4. Best Life. 17 Diseases That Are More Common in Women than in Men. <https://bestlifeonline.com/diseases-in-women>. Accessed August, 25 2021.
5. National Osteoporosis Foundation. What women need to know. <https://www.nof.org/preventing-fractures/general-facts/what-women-need-to-know>. Accessed April 19, 2022.
6. NHS. Multiple sclerosis. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/multiple-sclerosis>. Accessed April 19, 2022.
7. Mayo Clinic. Multiple sclerosis. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/multiple-sclerosis/symptoms-causes/syc-20350269>. Accessed April 19, 2022.
8. World Health Organization. Musculoskeletal conditions. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/musculoskeletal-conditions>. Accessed April 19, 2022.
9. NHS. Arthritis. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/arthritis/>. Accessed April 19, 2022.
10. Cardiovascular heart disease. British Heart Foundation. <https://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/conditions/cardiovascular-heart-disease>. Accessed April 19, 2022.
11. Uterine fibroids. Office of Women's Health. <https://www.womenshealth.gov/a-z-topics/uterine-fibroids>. Accessed June 7, 2022.
12. Leading Causes of Death – Females. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/women/lcod/2017/all-races-origins/index.htm>. Accessed June 7, 2022.
13. Massive uterine fibroid: a diagnostic dilemma. National Library of Medicine. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8276390/>. Accessed June 7, 2022.
14. Examining Research Gaps and Barriers to Care for Fibroids. Society for Women's Health Research. <https://swhr.org/examining-research-gaps-and-barriers-to-care-for-fibroids/>. Accessed June 8, 2022.
15. Heart Disease: Differences in Men and Women. Johns Hopkins Medicine. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/heart-disease-differences-in-men-and-women>. Accessed June 30, 2022

All Cigna products and services are provided by or through operating subsidiaries of Cigna Corporation, including Cigna Global Wellbeing Solutions Limited, and other contracted companies. The Cigna name, logos, and other Cigna marks are owned by Cigna Intellectual Property, Inc. Products and services may not be available in all jurisdictions and are expressly excluded where prohibited by applicable law. This material is provided for informational purposes only. It is believed accurate as of the date of publication and is subject to change. Such material should not be relied upon as legal, medical, or tax advice. As always, we recommend that you consult with your independent legal, medical, and/or tax advisors. ©2022 Cigna. Some content may be provided under license.