

from the project director

Dear Participant

Thank you once again for your continued participation in Women's Health Australia. With your help, we are able to provide information to governments and other agencies about the health needs of women across Australia.



This year, for example, we have given advice to the National Tobacco Strategy, the National Contenance Strategy, and the Watching Australia's Weight programme, as well as to agencies concerned with preventing falls in older women and improving women's use of Pap tests and mammograms.

We are surveying women in their 70s and 80s for the third time this year (please call our Freecall number 1800 068 081 if you haven't received your survey), as well as running smaller surveys on diabetes, contraception, work and motherhood.

Thank you for participating, and a special thank you to those women who have written to share more of their lives - not everything will fit into the boxes on the surveys and we love to hear about your experiences and your views about health and happiness.

Thank you.

Annette Dobson
Project Director

older Australian women: living life to the full

Surveying women in their 70s and 80s is an education for the research team. As you would expect, older women are often in poor physical health. Many have serious illnesses, and arthritis, high blood pressure and brittle bones are quite common. But the older women in the study are happier, less stressed, less depressed, and more optimistic than their daughters and granddaughters.

While some older women are having difficulties, many others are active members of their



communities, involved in charity work, caring for frail or disabled family and friends, and keeping an eye on grandchildren and even great grandchildren.

As one woman told us, "I am very independent with lots of interests including a part-time job, a voluntary job, play lots of bridge, on the board of the Bowls club - and I think this is the answer to keeping fit and well."

The challenge is to find out what it is that enables some women to stay so active and happy despite physical problems, and to help other women to be as positive as they age.

did you know? neither did we... until you told us!



Young women who smoke have increased rates of menstrual problems, and even have elevated risk of miscarriage. While many young women give up smoking when they are pregnant or planning a baby, others do not. And ex-smokers are at increased risk of taking

up smoking again after the baby arrives. Smoking is also associated with stress and depression.

Most of the young women in the survey use the pill for contraception. Most mid-age women have

thank you!!

Last year we invited you to allow us access to your Medicare data, so that we could link your survey responses with your use of health services. A huge thank you to everyone who gave us permission! And just a reminder that Medicare can tell us how often you went to the doctor and what sort of consultation or test you had, but not why you went or what the result

was. That's between you and your doctor.

tried it, but switched to sterilisation (tubes tied or partner vasectomy) after their family was complete.

The majority of the mid-age women in the survey are juggling a relationship, a job, and children at home - or at least two of these three! Despite this, mid-age women with many work and family roles are healthier and happier than those with only one.

Older women who are physically active are not only in better physical health. They also have better emotional health, are happier and less stressed, and have more social contacts than those who don't exercise.

women's health australia on the web

If you're on the net, take the opportunity to visit our new improved website - the address is

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/wha>

There you'll find details about the project, email contacts, and even photos of the office staff!



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diabetes

what is diabetes?

Diabetes is a condition in which the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood is too high because the body is unable to use it properly. This is because the body's method of converting glucose into energy is not working as it should.

Diabetes is the world's fastest growing disease and is one of Australia's national health priorities.

About 3% of the mid-age women and 10% of the older women in Women's Health Australia have been diagnosed with diabetes. Very few young women in the project have diabetes.

how do women feel about having diabetes?

Last year almost 900 mid-aged and older women in this study completed a questionnaire about how they cope with having diabetes. Most had a fairly positive view of their control of the condition. In fact, many felt that having diabetes had encouraged them to improve their lifestyle. However women with diabetes tend to have poorer health and require more visits to the doctor and more medications than other women their age. They are also more likely to

smart eating tips

We found these smart eating tips on the website of the Dietitians' Association of Australia (<http://www.daa.asn.au/>).

Eat a variety of vegetables each day. Try dark green, orange, cruciferous (eg broccoli), starchy and salad vegetables as well as dried beans and lentils.

Eat breakfast every day: People who eat breakfast when trying to lose weight have been shown to lose more weight than those skipping breakfast.

Eat more fibre by adding dried beans or lentils to soups and casseroles.



have high blood pressure, heart disease, and eyesight problems.

can anything be done to lessen the chances of getting diabetes?

Yes. Research has shown that by eating healthy foods and taking regular exercise, some forms of diabetes can be delayed or even prevented.



where can I get more information about diabetes?

You can ask your doctor, pharmacist or health care worker for more information about diabetes or you can visit one of the many websites, such as the Diabetes Australia website (<http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au>)

Thank you!

Creamy salad dressing: Try low fat natural yoghurt mixed with grain mustard as a replacement for mayonnaise on salads.

If you drink alcohol, it is recommended that men have no more than four standard drinks per day and women no more than two. A day or two without alcohol each week is also a good idea. A standard drink is a 100ml glass of wine, a 285ml glass of full-strength beer or a 30ml nip of spirits, and contains approximately 10 grams of alcohol. Remember, all alcoholic drinks add energy (calories) to the diet. Try low or reduced alcohol drinks for a healthier choice.

motherhood: still in fashion

You may have read reports claiming that young Australian women don't want to be mothers, and that as many as 25% won't ever have children. Well, that's not what you've been telling us. Nearly all the younger women in our survey want to be mothers



the time they are 35 - 12% want one child, 57% want two, and 23% want three or more.

Women are certainly having babies later than their mothers' generation, and most want a smaller family size (41% of the mid-aged women in our survey have 3 or more children). Younger women are taking advantage of opportunities to study or travel or see a bit of life before they settle down. But they are just as keen on motherhood as earlier generations - only 8% don't want a child by age 35, compared with 9% of mid-age women and 8% of older women who haven't had a child.

weight gain

Overweight is a growing concern in Australia. Even among the youngest women in our study, there is an increase in the number of women who are overweight. At the first survey, only 20% of the younger women were classed as "overweight" or "obese" - a level at which health risks increase significantly. By Survey 2 in 2000, this figure had risen to 31%.

Unfortunately it seems that one of the strongest predictors of weight gain is having a baby. New motherhood is a time of enormous change in women's lives and this is reflected in many of their health habits. While a large proportion of younger women gave up smoking while they were pregnant, they were also likely to give up physical activity and change their eating habits.

Maintaining healthy weight through major life transitions is a challenge. At the moment two of our researchers, Kylie Ball and Sandra Bell,



hormone replacement therapy

If you are taking hormone replacement therapy, have taken it in the past, or are contemplating taking it - or if your mother, daughter or friends use it - you will almost certainly have been concerned by recent reports that it can increase the risk of breast cancer, heart disease and stroke.

The evidence from the Women's Health Initiative in the USA that has had so much publicity in Australia came from a study of postmenopausal women taking HRT to prevent heart disease. Over 16,000 postmenopausal women aged between 50 to 79 were given HRT or a placebo. The results after five years showed that the women receiving HRT were at increased risk of breast cancer, heart disease, stroke and other serious diseases. A decision was made to stop part of the study at that point. To date this is the best available evidence about the effects of long term use of HRT.

The study suggests that long-term use of HRT after menopause may do more harm than good for many women. It did **not** look at women who were taking HRT for short periods during

menopause, and it does **not** tell us anything about the short-term use of HRT to relieve hot flushes or night sweats.

Women's Health Australia has found that 23% of the mid-age women, and 10% of the older women, were using HRT when they last completed a survey. Those

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There were noteworthy benefits of estrogen plus progesterin, including fewer cases of hip fractures and colon cancer, but on balance the harm was greater than the benefit.....

women who take HRT are generally in worse health than those who do not.

You can read more about the American study, including advice for concerned women, by going to <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/whi/> on the World

Wide Web. They advise that women should **not** take HRT if the main purpose is to prevent heart disease. Women taking HRT for menopause-related symptoms "may reap more benefits than risks", and women taking HRT to prevent osteoporosis should discuss the benefits and risks with their doctor. For more information you could also look at an Australian website <http://www.racgp.org.au>.

If you are not sure whether HRT is right for you, ask your doctor for advice.



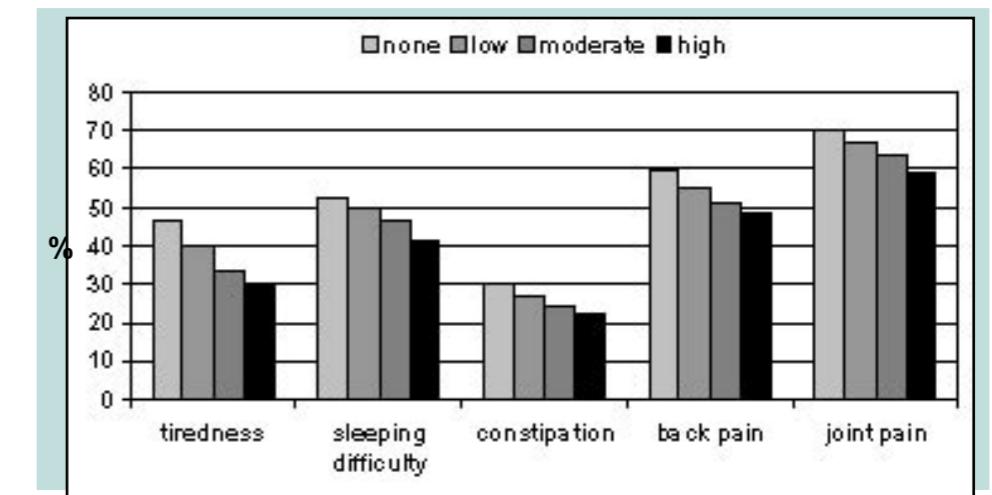
physical activity - never too late

In our last newsletter we told you that even a little physical activity is better than none. A peaceful walk on the beach, playing bowls, doing some tai chi, having a game of golf, gardening or taking the dog for a walk... they all help to keep us healthy.

But many older women don't exercise, and a significant number are worried that they might do themselves more harm than good.

So, should you be exercising in your 70s or 80s? **Absolutely!**

We've been looking at the information the older women have given us about their exercise and their well-being. As well as the clear benefits for heart health and strong bones, older women who are physically active do better in the little things. And in quality of life, it's often the little things that matter.



The graph above tells the story... older women who are physically active are least likely to experience a range of common symptoms, including tiredness, difficulty sleeping, joint and back pain, and constipation. They also score highest on several measures of emotional well-being, including a sense of vitality, social interactions, and mental health.

Recently we used the surveys to identify who had stopped being active, who had started, and who had continued. Among the older women who used to be active but stopped, emotional well-being got worse (even when we accounted for physical health and other factors). Among those who took it up, emotional health improved over time.



So physical activity is not only good for you, it can also help you feel good about yourself and your life.