



Women's Health East

Women's Sexual & Reproductive Health

Reproductive health can be described as ... a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing ... in all matters relating to the reproductive system and its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a responsible, satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how to do so.¹

Sexual health is... a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.²

Fertility and Infertility in Australia

In 2010 Australia saw a record number of 297,900 births registered, with a fertility rate of 1.89 births per woman.³ Women continue to delay child birth with the median age being 30.7 years, up from 28.3 years in 1990.³ Noteworthy is the decline in fertility rates of teenagers from 22 babies per 1000 teenage females in 1990 to 15.5 in 2010. This is contrasted with a tripling of fertility rates for women in the 40-44 age range, rising from 5.5 babies per 1000 women in 1990 to 14.8 babies in 2010.³

There is increasing demand for Assisted Reproduction Treatment (ART) in Australia, with 65,180 treatment cycles in 2010, up from 35,810 in 2005. Of these treatments, 17.2% resulted in live births, with 8.2% of these being multiple births and 48.2% resulting in deliveries by caesarean section. The average age of ART assisted mothers was 35.8 years.⁴

Births in Victoria 2011

A total of 71,444 births were recorded in Victoria in 2011.⁵ The average age for Victorian women giving birth is higher than the Australian average of 30.6 years and continuing to increase. In 2011 it was 31.4 years compared to 30.7 years in 2007 and 27.6 in 1986.⁶ The average age for first time mothers in Australia has also increased to 28.9 years compared to 25.6 in 1986.⁵

More than a third of all births were to women aged 30-34 and 2.6% of births were to women aged below 20.⁷ One percent of births were to Aboriginal women.⁸

Births in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR)

Whilst the EMR holds about 20% of Victorian residents, it contributed 15.7% of Victorian births in 2011.⁸ Within the EMR, Whitehorse had the largest proportion of births, with 2.62% of Victorian births, and Manningham had the smallest with 1.44%.⁸ The number of new mothers in 2007 aged under 20 ranged from 1 for Boroondara (contributing 0.1% to births to women under 20) to 48 for Yarra Ranges (2.6%).⁸

Mothers aged 30 years and older comprised 70% of all births during 2007 and 2008 in the EMR, with the majority being born to mothers aged 30-34 years (39%). Mothers 40 years + were significantly higher at 5% than mothers under 20 years at 1.2%. This reflects the National data trend.⁸

Sexually Transmitted Infections – Chlamydia & HIV

Young people between the ages of 15-19 have the highest rates of genital chlamydia.⁹ For young women aged 15-19 years the rate increased from 569 per 100,000 in 2001 to 2228 per 100,000 in 2011.⁹ This is triple that of their male equivalents who recorded 714 per 100,000 in 2011.⁹

In Australia there are currently 24,731 people living with HIV with approximately 9% of these being women.¹⁰ In 2010 Victoria recorded 228 new positive diagnoses, with 20 being women.¹¹

Sexualisation of young girls

An American Psychological Association report found that sexualisation of girls in media negatively affects cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, and healthy sexual development. Sexualisation was defined as when a person's value comes only from their sexual appeal or behaviour or when objectified – 'made into a thing for another's sexual use'.^{12,13}

Women with Disabilities

Women with disabilities face discriminatory attitudes which impact on their sexual and reproductive rights, and their access to sexual health information, sexual health screening and treatment. Prejudicial attitudes can result in their ability and right to parenting being questioned or even discouraged, and limited access being offered to the range of options such as contraception and assisted reproductive treatment. This limits women's choices and options about becoming a mother.^{14,15}

In Australia, and in comparison to other women, women with disabilities are:

- more likely to be unlawfully sterilised;
- more likely to have medical interventions to control their fertility;
- more likely to be raped;
- less likely to have children; and,
- more likely to be a single mother¹⁵

Same-sex attracted women

Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity has impacts on the health and wellbeing of many women and can lead to hesitance in disclosure of sexuality, poorer health outcomes and decreased social participation. It can result in decreased access to health services including cervical and breast cancer screenings.^{16,17}

Rates of sexually transmitted infections (STI) in lesbian women are comparable to heterosexual women, and in bisexual women are possibly higher. The most common STIs in same sex attracted women are bacterial vaginitis and candida, with chlamydia, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), gonorrhoea and blood borne viruses being rare. A lack of specific health information for same sex attracted women contributes to a belief by many that they are not as susceptible to STIs as other women. Same sex attracted women are also more likely than other women to smoke, which increases their risk of bacterial vaginitis and cervical abnormality, and significantly more likely to inject drugs, placing them at greater risk of blood borne diseases.¹⁷

The *Assisted Reproductive Treatment Act 2008* allows women in a same-sex relationship to undergo IVF treatment to conceive and enshrines in law that;

- the woman who gives birth is presumed to be the mother of any child born as a result of the pregnancy;
- the female partner is considered to be the legal parent, provided she and the child's biological mother were living together as a couple on a genuine domestic basis when the IVF procedure was performed; and
- the female partner must consent to the IVF procedure.¹⁸

Pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS), Menopause and Hysterectomy rates

- About 30% of Australian women experience some emotional or physical symptoms before they menstruate. Between 3% and 8% of women have a debilitating form of PMS that interferes with their daily lives.¹⁹
- The average age for menopause is 52.²⁰ Symptoms vary during menopause with approximately 20% of women experiencing minimal symptoms, 20% severe and 60% moderate.²¹ Psychological, social and cultural factors can influence women's experience of menopause.²¹
- In 2005-6, in Australia 27,500 hysterectomies were performed, making it one of the most common operations. Rates were significantly lower for women in the most advantaged areas (3 per 1,000 compared with 3.79 overall).¹⁹

Abortions

In 2009, the estimated number of abortions in Australia was 76,546.¹ Women in the 25-34 age range accounted for 39.26% as opposed to 11.47% for those women 19 years old and younger. Women 35 years and older sat at 27%.¹

'... 22.6% of women aged 16-59 years in Australia report ever having had an abortion.'¹

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