


Australian women's knowledge of sex and gender issues in health research and care

Sex (biological characteristics) and gender (socially and culturally constructed characteristics) profoundly impact health and wellbeing. A person's sex and/or gender can influence their risk for a disease, how that disease progresses, what treatments are effective for them, what health behaviours they engage in, and how health professionals interact with them.¹

However, health research and care often overlook the importance of sex and gender, leading to blind spots in the evidence and poorer health outcomes for women. For example, medical research and clinical trials have tended to focus on adult men,^{2,3} resulting in women sometimes receiving inappropriate care and treatments that can range from ineffective to harmful.⁴



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It's important that women are aware of the issues around sex and gender bias in health research and care, can advocate for themselves, and contribute to calls for change. To inform the design of awareness-raising efforts, we used the 2025 National Women's Health Survey to assess women's current knowledge of sex and gender issues in health research and care.

Knowledge of sex and gender issues

We presented women with a series of statements about sex and gender in health research and care and asked them to identify each as true or false.



Figure 1: Percentage of women who correctly answered each question.

Women are more likely than men to feel that their pain is dismissed by healthcare professionals [TRUE]

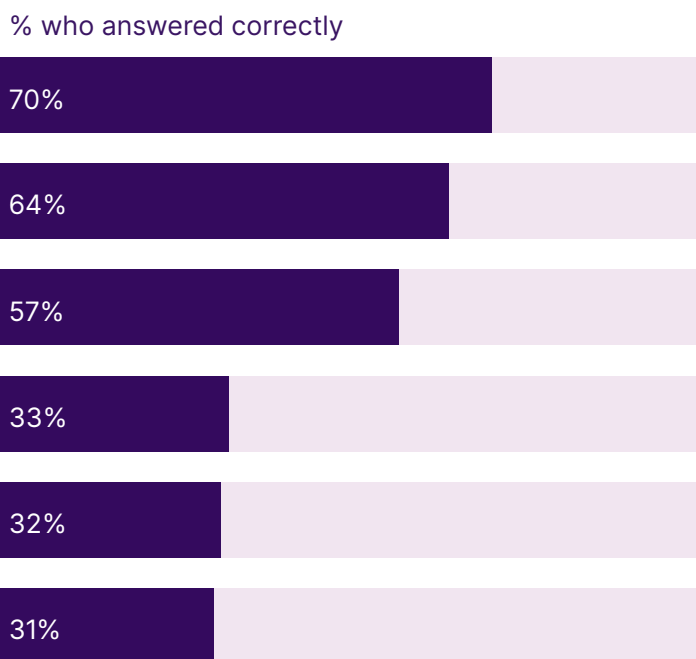
Medicines affect men and women the same [FALSE]

Women and men have different heart attack symptoms [TRUE]

More men than women suffer from autoimmune diseases [FALSE]

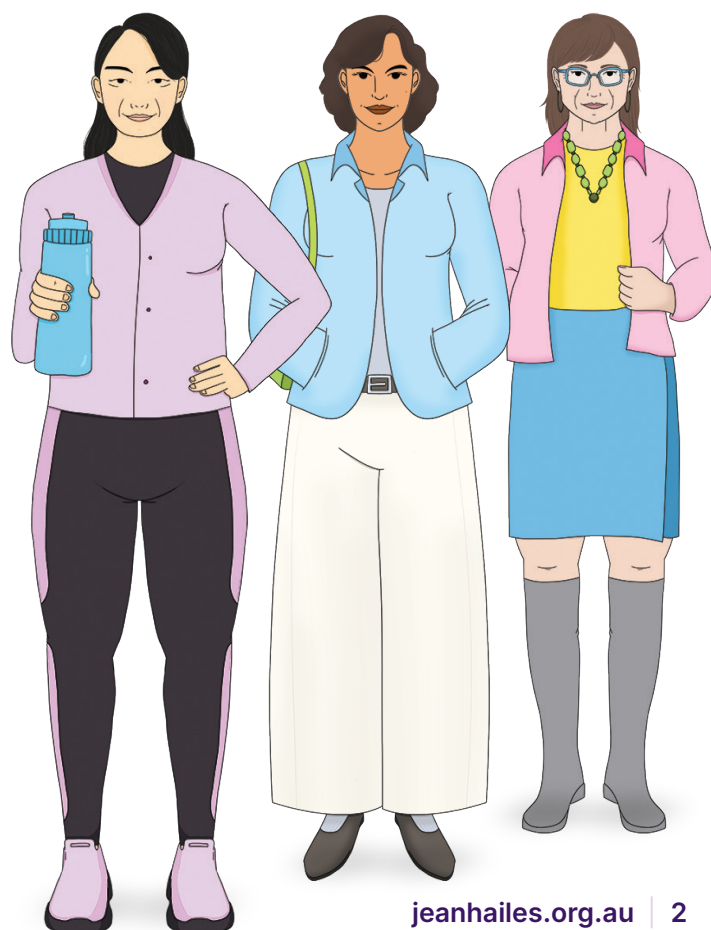
Historically, medicines were tested mostly on men [TRUE]

Most laboratory research is done on female specimens [FALSE]



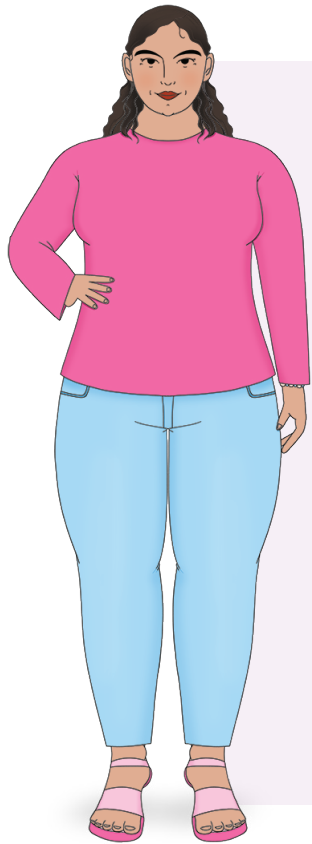
Most women (70%) knew that women are more likely than men to feel their pain is dismissed by healthcare professionals, but there were knowledge gaps in some key areas. For example, only around:

- 6 in 10 knew that women and men experience different heart attack symptoms (57%) and that medicines can affect men and women differently (64%).
- 3 in 10 (33%) knew that autoimmune diseases disproportionately affect women.
- 3 in 10 knew about sex and gender biases in medical research, including that historically medicines were mostly tested on men (32%) and that most laboratory research is done on male specimens (31%).



Understanding of sex and gender

Sex refers to a person's biological characteristics like their anatomy, hormones and chromosomes, whereas gender is a social and cultural concept that encompasses things like roles, behaviours and identities. We presented women with explanations of the terms sex and gender and asked them to identify them as true or false.



7 in 10 (67%)

women understood that the term 'sex' refers to biological things like anatomy, hormones and chromosomes.



6 in 10 (59%)

women understood that the term 'gender' refers to things like roles, behaviours and identities.

Women aged 18 to 24 years were more likely than women in older age groups to correctly understand the terms sex and gender. For example, 8 in 10 (83%) women aged 18 to 24 understood the term sex, compared with only 5 in 10 (53%) women aged 65 and over.

So what?

- Sex and gender issues in health research and care can have profound consequences for the health and wellbeing of women.
- However, our results show that there are some key gaps in women's knowledge about these issues. For example, many women lack potentially life-saving knowledge about the differences in heart attack symptoms between women and men.
- The results also show that few women are aware of sex and gender biases in medical research and how those biases might affect them.
- Addressing sex and gender bias in health research and care is increasingly becoming an area of attention for state and federal governments in Australia.^{5,6,7} However, there is still significant progress required. For example, more research that takes sex and gender into consideration is needed to ensure that all people have access to health care that is tailored to their needs.⁸
- Continuing to raise awareness of sex and gender issues in health research and care is critical to advance health equity in Australia and ensure women receive timely and appropriate care.

References

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About this short report

The Jean Hailes National Women’s Health Survey (NWHs) is an annual survey designed to help us better understand the issues that affect women in Australia, their attitudes and behaviours, and the health information and policy changes that will help improve their health and wellbeing. The 2025 NWHs explored Australian women’s knowledge of sex and gender in health research and care. It was conducted online in mid-2025 with a national sample, but only in English. A total of 3,629 women aged 18 and over residing in Australia participated in the survey.

The 2025 NWHs was conducted in partnership with the Centre for Sex & Gender Equity in Health & Medicine at The George Institute for Global Health with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing.

This short report was authored by Jean Hailes staff in collaboration with Prof Bronwyn Graham and Prof Cara Tannenbaum.

For more information about the NWHs, see the technical report on our [website](#).