Men and Women Are Different

Because women and men have different bodies, their health care needs are not the same. Not only are some body parts specific to men and women (like the prostate or the uterus), but diseases and medical problems may show up in different ways in women than they do in men. In order to understand these differences, doctors and scientists study female and male medical problems as well as diseases that affect both men and women.

Physiology, or how the body works, is different between the sexes. Sex, the biological makeup of each person (based on his or her genes and chromosomes), is different from gender, which is how society and each particular culture see the roles of men and women. In addition to male and female bodies working differently, women and men deal with their health care needs in different ways.

The January 22/29, 2003, issue of JAMA includes an article about the roles of sex and gender and how they influence health care and medical research.

HEALTH ISSUES FOR WOMEN AND MEN

Women’s health care is much more than treatment related to childbirth or menopause. Women are more likely to have certain medical problems than men and may respond to medications differently than men do. Women and men may have different symptoms for the same medical problem.

Heart (also called cardiac) disease, the number one killer of women in the United States, often has mild or no symptoms in women until they have a deadly heart attack. The heart-related pain (angina) in the left side of the chest, common in men with heart disease, is less commonly present in women who have heart disease.

Some mental illnesses, such as depression, happen more often in women. Other mental illnesses are more common in males, including attention-deficit disorder and autism.

Other medical problems shown to be different in men and women include urinary incontinence (loss of urine), diabetes, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis, and obesity. Also, it is important to know that studies have shown that women and men experience pain differently. Women may not receive enough treatment for their pain because of these differences.

MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC STUDIES

In the past, women were often not included in medical research studies. Therefore, results of these studies were based only on the men who took part in these studies. Those results were often analyzed with only a male point of view. Now, scientists study women separately as well as mixed with men in large trials of medications and other treatments.

The reasons for men and women having different responses to diseases, medications, and treatments may be because of the differences in male and female genes. Scientists are studying genes, chromosomes, and cells to help understand these differences.

Several long-term studies of women are ongoing. These trials are examining things like menopausal hormone therapy, osteoporosis, breast cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. Results of these studies are reported in major medical journals, including JAMA. Discuss with your doctor any questions you may have about these research studies and their impact on your health.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

• National Institutes of Health Office of Research on Women's Health
  www4.od.nih.gov/orwh

• American Heart Association
  800/242-8721
  www.americanheart.org

• Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
  www.mooddisorders.org

• National Institute of Mental Health
  800/421-4211
  www.nimh.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA’s Web site at www.jama.com. They are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on women and heart disease was published in the December 25, 2002, issue, and Patient Pages on depression were published in the August 14, 2002, February 13, 2002, and September 27, 2000, issues.

Sources: National Institutes of Health Office of Research on Women’s Health, American Heart Association

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