



Fact Sheet:

An overview of sexual and reproductive health

Sexual and reproductive health is a fundamental part of our health and wellbeing. It is a broad term used to describe many things including the ability to:

- Manage fertility.
- Access to contraception.
- Enjoy safe, respectful and pleasurable sexual relationships.



Sexual and reproductive health underpins social and economic development, yet stigma, taboos and embarrassment often mean it is neglected in favour of more 'comfortable' policies.

How do we define sexual health?

Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity

"It 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, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled."

[World Health Organisation](#)

How do we define reproductive health?

"Reproductive health implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so."

[World Health Organisation](#)

What are sexual and reproductive health rights?

Sexual and reproductive rights are the rights of women to freely make decisions about their own bodies, including:

- ✓ Having their bodily autonomy, privacy and personal autonomy respected.
- ✓ Freely define their own sexuality, including sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.
- ✓ Deciding whether and when to be sexually active.
- ✓ Choosing their sexual partners.
- ✓ Having safe and pleasurable sexual experiences.
- ✓ Deciding whether, when and who to marry.
- ✓ Deciding whether, when and by what means to have a child or children, and how many children to have.
- ✓ Having access to the information, resources, services and support needed to achieve all the above, free from discrimination, coercion, exploitation and violence.

Even though women's sexual and reproductive rights are law in Australia, there are parts of Victoria where there is little or no access to the information, support and services that women require.

How do sexual and reproductive health rights impact women's health?

Sex and reproduction are unique and specific health needs for women and girls that play a central role in overall health and wellbeing over the entire life course. How and to what extent these needs are met often depends on the extent to which girls' and women's sexual and reproductive rights are respected, protected and fulfilled in both their private life and within society ([source](#)).

Violations of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are often due to deeply engrained beliefs and societal values pertaining to women and their sexuality ([source](#)).

Sexual and reproductive ill health not only impacts a woman's physical and emotional health, but has social and economic impacts for the individual, their families, communities, and society. Those most vulnerable to sexual and reproductive ill health are:

- Women with disabilities
- Young women
- Rural women
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women
- Women from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- Sex workers

"In Australia, where the overall population is among the healthiest in the world, we have unacceptably high levels of sexual and reproductive ill health."

[Family Planning Alliance Australia](#)

How can we improve women's sexual and reproductive health?

Good sexual and reproductive health requires a comprehensive approach involving:

Choice - removal of barriers embedded in laws, policies, and the economy so that women can exercise free choice in their sexual and reproductive health.

Knowledge – equipping individuals, families and communities with the knowledge and capacity to ensure sexual and reproductive health.

Access – ensuring women have ready access to quality services that are accountable to the clients and communities served.

To achieve this, there must be sustained investment and a deliberate and planned collaboration among all stakeholders involved to maximise resources. ([source](#)).

Investing in choice, knowledge and access could minimise future costs in the health system and realise significant benefits for women, families and communities ([source](#)).

What is being done to improve the sexual and reproductive health of women in Victoria's Barwon South West region?

Women's Health and Wellbeing Barwon South West is the region's lead organisation for promoting women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

We support our region to deliver coordinated, best-practice, capacity building initiatives and expert advice. A new sexual and reproductive health strategy, informed by diverse women's voices from across the region, is underway. Get in touch to find out how you can get involved.

Contact

Katie McKean, Regional Facilitator

Women's Health & Wellbeing Barwon South West
0436 298 854 | kmckean@womenshealthbsw.org



Resources:

Engender Health 2011, SEED Assessment Guide For Family Planning Programming

<https://www.engenderhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SEED-Assessment-Guide-for-Family-Planning-Programming.pdf>

GenWest 2011, Social Determinants of Sexual and Reproductive Health

https://whwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/SocDet_Web.pdf

GenWest 2016, The health inequities of sexual and reproductive health: A review of the literature

https://whwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SRH_literature_review_hires.pdf

UNFPA 2022 Seeing the unseen: the case for action in the neglected crisis of unintended pregnancy

https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN_SWP22%20report_0.pdf