

# Health issues affecting women

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While men and women contract various conditions, some health issues affect women differently and more commonly. Some of the conditions that pose considerable health risks in women are:



## Heart disease

Women suffer higher heart attack deaths compared to men. Women may experience the “classic” heart attack symptoms of chest pressure, chest discomfort, or shortness of breath, just as men do. But women also may have symptoms such as back pain, usually on the left side; shoulder pain; a fullness in the stomach; or nausea as signs of an impending heart attack.

## Breast cancer

Breast cancer, which typically originates in the lining of the milk ducts, can spread to other organs.

Approximately 19.4 million women aged 15 years and older live at risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer – cancer affecting women in South Africa the most. Awareness of the symptoms, and early detection through self-examination and screening, can help lead to earlier diagnosis, resulting in improved treatment outcomes. Initially, women afflicted with breast cancer may develop breast lumps. Most breast lumps are nonthreatening, but women need to have each one checked by a healthcare professional.

## Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer among South African women. The primary underlying cause of cervical cancer is the Human Papilloma Virus. Cervical cancer can be successfully treated if detected early, so women must be aware of symptoms and what is normal for their bodies. Symptoms include abnormal bleeding between periods, heavier and longer menstrual periods, vaginal discharge, vaginal bleeding or pain during intercourse / after menopause, and increased urinary frequency. Regular Pap smears can detect cervical cancer. HPV vaccination may also lower the risk for cervical cancer.

## Gynaecological health

Bleeding and discharge are a normal part of the menstrual cycle. However, added symptoms during menstruation may indicate health issues, and unusual symptoms, such as bleeding between menstruations and frequent urinating, can mimic other health conditions. Vaginal issues could also indicate serious problems such as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or reproductive tract cancer. While healthcare providers might treat mild infections easily, they can lead to conditions such as infertility or kidney failure if left unchecked.

## Pregnancy issues

Pre-existing conditions can worsen during pregnancy, threatening a mother's and a child's health. Asthma, diabetes, and depression can harm the mother and child during pregnancy if not managed properly. Pregnancy can cause a healthy mother's red blood cell count to drop, a condition called anaemia, or induce depression. Another problem arises when a reproductive cell implants outside the uterus, making further gestation unfeasible. Fortunately, obstetricians can manage and treat common and rare health issues during pregnancy.

## Osteoporosis

Women are much more likely to develop osteoporosis than men. Osteoporosis causes bones to become weak and brittle — so brittle that a fall or even mild stresses such as bending over or coughing can cause a fracture. Osteoporosis-related fractures most commonly occur in the hip, wrist, or spine. There typically are no symptoms in the early stages of bone loss. But once your bones have been weakened by osteoporosis, you might have signs and symptoms that include:

- Back pain, caused by a fractured or collapsed vertebra
- Loss of height over time
- A bone that breaks much more easily than expected

Healthcare providers measure bone density using an X-ray or ultrasound diagnostic to detect the condition. While no cure exists for osteoporosis, care providers can prescribe treatment to impede illness progression, including dietary supplements, healthy lifestyle choices, or prescription medication.

## Depression and anxiety

It is widely accepted that depression is more common in women than men. The ratio is disproportionate – it is estimated that up to 70% of people suffering from depression are women. Natural hormonal fluctuations can lead to depression or anxiety. Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) occurs commonly among women, while premenstrual dysmorphic disorder (PMDD) presents similar, but greatly intensified, symptoms. Shortly after birth, many mothers acquire a form of depression called the “baby blues,” but perinatal depression causes similar – but much stronger – concerns, emotional shifts, sadness, and tiredness. Perimenopause, the shift into menopause, can also cause depression. Regardless of the symptoms, healthcare providers can provide relief with a prescription or treatments.

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