

HOW 57,000 WOMEN ARE SHAPING HEALTH POLICY IN AUSTRALIA



University of Newcastle researchers helped create the largest and longest-running women's health study in Australian history. With more than 20 years of insights already in hand and a long track record of impact, the team received a major funding boost in late 2020 to keep the insights coming.

The lifelong health implications of violence and abuse. How mental health changes through the years. The impact of multiple chronic conditions. Housing and residential care for older women. The prevalence of endometriosis in Australia. The impact of COVID-19 on women specifically.

These are just a handful of issues researchers from the [Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health](#) (also known as Women's Health Australia) report on for government, health stakeholders and the broader community.

The collaborative project between the University of Newcastle and the University of Queensland started in 1996 and sees the research teams work together to guide and manage the full scope of the project, including year-to-year research agendas.

They also partner with government, non-government organisations, and other stakeholders to ensure findings are widely available and can be translated to help improve women's health.

In recognition of the importance of this project and its ongoing impact on shaping women's health policy and practice, the Australian Government provided \$8.5 million to extend the program another three years, until 2023.

This means the research team will ultimately be able to analyse 27 years of data specifically about women's physical and mental health – and use those insights to influence positive and practical change at the state, national and international levels.



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Research methodology

The longitudinal study assesses the physical and mental health of more than 57,000 Australian women across four age cohorts: those born between 1921-26, 1946-51, 1973-78 and 1989-95. It captures data on a broad range of health factors including:

- physical and emotional health (well-being, major diagnoses, symptoms)
- use of health services (GPs, specialist and other visits, access, satisfaction, hospital admissions, maternity, aged care)
- health behaviours and risk factors (diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol and other drugs)
- time use (paid and unpaid work, family roles and leisure activities)
- socio-demographic factors (location, education, employment, family composition)
- life stages and key events (childbirth, divorce, widowhood).

Data collection and integration

The surveys collect information from each age cohort at varying times, depending on their stage of life. In 2021, the project's oldest active participants will turn 100, giving researchers the opportunity to collect data from women aged between 18 and 100 years of age.

Study data is linked with data from national administrative datasets such as the Medicare Benefits Schedule, Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, National Death Index, and Aged Care. It also links to state and territory datasets including hospital admissions, perinatal data, and cancer registries.

They serve as a platform for evaluating policies and strategies such as perinatal mental health screening, access to psychological services, health assessments and medication use.

Future directions

The additional \$8.5 million announced in late 2020 will not only allow this program to continue until at least 2023 but will also finance a project to improve the representation of Australian women from South East Asia, North East Asia and Southern Asia.

"The new funding will allow the study to continue to fulfill this important function at a time where improvements in the women's health space are being prioritised in response to the National Women's Health Strategy 2020-2030." –

Australia's Federal Health Minister The Hon Greg Hunt MP (Oct 2020)

Research impact

Research and data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health has contributed to policies and guidelines aimed at improving Australian women's health, well-being and access to health services, including:

- National Women's Health Strategy 2020 to 2030
- Perinatal mental health guidelines (2017)
- 2014 Australian Government Physical Activity Guidelines
- Choose Health: Be Active. A physical activity guide for older Australians (published 2014)
- The 2013 New South Wales Government Health Framework for Women's Health
- 2010 National Women's Health Policy
- The Victorian Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2010-2014)
- National respite for carers program (2009)
- 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Older Australians.

It also contributes to special reports on topics including the lifetime impact of abuse and the impact of global and domestic emergencies, such as bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic.

To support the sharing of knowledge and knowledge translation, survey information is freely available to collaborating researchers on the project's [website](#).

- This information has been included in 800 scientific publications, which are also available on the project website.
- ALSWH collaborators stretch across the globe, with more than 650 collaborators from Australia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Japan, the United States of America, Switzerland and Argentina.

To learn more about this research program, contact:

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