

Parliamentary Briefing

Women's Health Strategy, July 2022

Background

ONS data show that women have longer life expectancy but shorter healthy life expectancy¹. This means they spend more of their lives in poor health than men. At Age UK we agree that a strategy focused on improving women's health is crucial and it must recognise and responds to the needs of older women as well as younger ones.

Historically, the health system has been designed by men, for men, with the majority of research into health conditions being conducted by and with men. Given this focus, not as much is known about women's health issues, or about how conditions and diseases that affect both sexes can manifest differently in women.

Women across the country report not being listened to; having their worries and concerns dismissed; playing down or dismissing their own health concerns as unimportant or 'normal'. In this context, there has been a real need for a strategy to redress the balance and address inequalities and give women the confidence to seek help with mental and physical health problems when they arise.

The biggest health issues affecting women are:

- **Cardiovascular Disease** is one of the UK's leading causes of death for women, with one in 15 women dying from coronary heart disease (CHD). In 2019, CHD was the leading cause of death worldwide.²
- **Breast Cancer**, women over 65 have a higher mortality rate than women under 65.³
- **Osteoporosis** is much higher prevalence rates in older women than older men. Loss of oestrogen during menopause is a large factor in this, as it's the hormone that keeps bone density and bone strength stable. Other factors are having a lighter skeleton than men, and living longer than men - during which time bone density continues to fall.⁴
- **Muscular skeletal conditions**, such as arthritis, affect more women than men (11.6 million vs. 8.7 million).⁵
- **Dementia** is more prevalent in women (65%) than men (35%). In 2019, it was the leading cause of death for women.⁶
- **Menopause** is a major life event affecting all women in a variety of ways, both short and long term, and sound menopause care is key to healthy lives in mid- and later-life.⁷

Older Women and the pandemic

Age UK's most recent research found that significant numbers of older women are not recovering well from the effects of the pandemic we found that:

¹ ONS, ONS mid-year population estimates (2020) for total UK population aged 60+ = 16,364,456

² BHF UK Factsheet. January 2022.

³ Cancer Research UK, <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/breast-cancer#heading-Three>, accessed August 2022.

⁴ Royal Osteoporosis Society, <https://theros.org.uk/information-and-support/osteoporosis/causes/>, accessed August 2022.

⁵ Versus Arthritis (2021) The State of Musculoskeletal Health.

⁶ Prince, M et al (2014) Dementia UK: Update Second Edition report produced by King's College London and the London School of Economics for the Alzheimer's Society

⁷ British Menopause Society (2020) Vision for menopause care in the UK.

- 2,298,000 (27%) older women saying they are in **more physical pain** since the start of pandemic compared with 1,492,000 (19%) older men.
- 2,383,000 (28%) older women saying their **general health has got worse** compared with 1,728,000 (22%) older men.

And instead of older women feeling well supported by the health system at a time when it is most needed:

- 3,744,000 (44%) older women expressed concerns about having **access to GPs** compared with 2,592,000 (33%) older men.
- 2,723,000 (32%) older women said they were concerned about having **access to hospital appointments** compared with 1,885,000 (24%) older men.
- 1,617,000 (19%) older women were concerned about having **access to mental health support** compared with 1,021,000 (13%) older men.
- and 1,106,000 (13%) older women worried about **access to dementia services** compared with 628,000 (8%) older men.

Older women told us:

"I am waiting for treatment for an irritable bladder, my condition is getting worse, my recent telephone consultation with the hospital was cancelled and I was not notified. I only found out when I called the hospital to see why I had not had the telephone call. The telephone call is now re-scheduled for 5 weeks later." Woman aged 75-79.

"Physio discontinued because of lockdown. Mobility problems began to increase due to inability to access water exercise during lockdown as pools closed. Increased anxiety and digestive problems due to death of close relative in lockdown plus being support bubble for bereaved close relative with Alzheimer's. Now requiring gastro intestinal investigations. Also have now developed a heart arrhythmia requiring further cardiac investigation." Woman aged 65-69.

"Arthritis and mobility much worse even though I walk every day. Lack of help after a very bad fall has meant a problem with my legs has got much worse. I have been told I was not important and not to phone back when I phoned the hospital for an appointment, as I had been instructed to do in a letter from them." Woman aged 70-74.

Publication of the Women's Health Strategy

Following a call for evidence and the publication of its Vision for Women's Health, the Government has now published a [ten-year Women's Health Strategy](#). The strategy follows a call for evidence which ran from March to June 2021.

Age UK's position on the Government's Strategy

At Age UK we welcome the publication of the Women's Health Strategy which has followed a call for evidence from women across England. We are pleased to see the aims of the Strategy; to achieve boosted health outcomes for all women and girls and a radically improved mechanism in which the health and care system engages and listens to all women and girls.

What is in the Strategy for older women?

We are particularly pleased to see the following ambitions included in the Strategy:

- Support for women in the workplace to better manage symptoms of the menopause and manage their long term conditions. Awareness raising and practical support measures from employers to help older women remain in work for longer, should they wish to.
- Funding for new research into women's health issues, including older women's health, which will lead to greater understanding of conditions that impact women, and how women's health needs can be met.
- Improvements in healthy life expectancy, with a life course approach adopted to instil healthy lifestyle habits from a young age and throughout women's lives.
- Healthcare professionals will be well informed on the differences between men and women's risk factors, presentation and treatment for long term conditions.
- Women will be well informed about cardiovascular disease risk factors.
- A greater focus on inclusion of under-represented groups and groups that experience health disparities in order to ensure that improvements in health are available to all women.

What Age UK would like to see:

There are elements of the Women's Health Strategy where there is no mention of older women, and we would like to see the following further specific commitments:

- The Strategy has an ambition to see greater use of technologies to empower women to manage their own health conditions and access treatment. We urge the Government to **ensure that these technologies are part of a range of services, support and treatment options** so that older women do not lose out. Not all older women are digitally excluded, but many are through either technical, financial or disability related disadvantages. In person, or telephone options must be available for those unable to access technologies
- To acknowledge and consider the **long term impact** of menopause on older women's physical and mental health, which can affect them for the rest of their lives.
- Understand that mental health conditions can and do manifest differently in older people as their health and care becomes more complex. **We were disappointed that there is no specific mention of older women's mental health** and that the focus is on girls, younger women and working age women.
- We welcome the encouragement to expand **women's health hubs** but are **concerned about the lack of funding for local areas** to establish these, and the lack of targets to set them up.
- We are pleased to see the commitments to improve training for clinicians at all levels of the health system, from undergraduate training to continuous professional development for experienced staff. We would like to see **a specific focus on older women in this training**, to acknowledge the complexities of living with multiple long term conditions.

Get in touch

If you have any questions or would like to meet to discuss older women's health, please contact Roshni Mistry, Senior Public Affairs Officer, at roshni.mistry@ageuk.org.uk. Age UK provides the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Ageing and Older People. The APPG works to engage with the political and legislative issues, the group covers a wide range of issues from housing and transport to health and social care. For more information, please get in touch.