Men Only - “no go” zones hide the true picture

Prostate - focus of a generation

Erection problems? No problem

Mental health
Insights into men’s health

The vast majority of Australian men claim to enjoy good health. They eat right, aim to get plenty of sleep and in many instances enjoy the support of a loving life partner and an active sex life.

On the face of it, men have good reason to be content.

But scratch the surface and it becomes clear that on the issue of personal health, men often face unique challenges. There are a number of medical conditions that men find it very difficult to discuss with their doctor – conditions that can be life-threatening if left untreated.

In this edition of the Pfizer Health Report, we put the spotlight on men’s health to discover just how healthy Australian men really are, and the chief threats that could compromise their future well-being. It’s a revealing look at what it means to be a modern man in Australia, and will hopefully serve to reassure Australian men that many of their concerns are universally shared.

About the research

The Pfizer Health Report was carried out by StollzNow Research using a quantitative permission-based online panel of 2,500 Australian adults aged 18 years and over. To ensure that the survey is representative of the Australian adult population quotas were set for gender, age, state and region (metro / rural and regional areas).

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Australians as a whole regard themselves as a healthy bunch. But certain health issues remain taboo.

Australians overall are in good shape. In a recent Pfizer survey, 85% of respondents - men and women - reported being in “good health”, and an equal proportion believed their partner also enjoyed robust health.\(^1\)

While this also means that at any given time 15% of Australians surveyed are in “poor health”, on the whole the vast majority of us appear to be very healthy.

Almost 80% of men have a health condition

If we dig deeper however the picture among men appears less glowing. Around 1 in 5 men say they have no health problems, yet 79% admit to having a medical condition.\(^2\)

The most commonly reported issues are:\(^3\)
- weight problems – 36%
- stress – 33%
- hypertension – 23%
- high cholesterol – 23%
- problems with erection – 21%
- depression – 20%
- drinking too much alcohol – 15%
- heart problems – 11%
- diabetes – 11%
- prostate problems 8%

All of these conditions are treatable or at least manageable. But men are more comfortable discussing some conditions with their doctor than others.

Those conditions men feel able to approach their doctor about include:\(^4\)
- heart problems  - high cholesterol
- hypertension  - diabetes

There are several health issues that men feel less comfortable talking through with their doctor, notably weight problems and stress.\(^5\)

Certain subjects remain taboo

At the extreme end of the comfort spectrum there is a range of potentially very serious health problems that men are significantly less comfortable discussing with their GP. Depression, prostate problems, over-consumption of alcohol and erectile problems are the areas men have the most difficulty with.\(^6\)

A reluctance to seek professional medical help for what can be significant health concerns can compromise a man’s health. In this edition of the Pfizer Health report, we look at why men are reluctant to discuss certain conditions, and what can be done to remove the stigma from these taboo subjects.

At a glance

The majority (54%) of Australians are “very happy” and 40% are “happy” with their relationship. Only 6% of Australians are “unhappy” with their relationship. Australians aged between 40-49 years have a slightly higher “unhappy” rating which could suggest marriages in this age group are strained.\(^7\)

Men who believe they are in “good health” are less likely to suffer from a range of health conditions than men who are in “poor health”. The types of conditions all these men experience are the same, but men in “poor” health experience them more.\(^8\)

Stress and depression are major health concerns for Australian men aged less than fifty years.\(^9\)

As men age their health problems become more physical in their nature and it is vitally important that these men seek medical help to guide them through this time.\(^10\)

Australians highly value their sex lives with 77% rating it either “extremely important”, “very important” or “important”. This means that almost 23% feel their sex life is “not important”, which is nearly a quarter of the adult population of Australia.\(^11\)

Having sex “several times a week” is mostly done by Australians who feel they have good health, are in a happy relationship and are aged between 18-49 years of age. As Australians age the frequency of sexual intercourse lessens. By age 50, 43% of these Australians are having sex less often than once a month.\(^12\)

key statistics revealed by Pfizer research:
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Among the 79% of men who report having a health problem, 1 in 3 (33%) experience stress. A further 20% suffer from depression.

Mental health issues also present concerns for the future - 31% of men worry that they will experience stress as they age. One in four (25%) are concerned about experiencing depression at some point.

Despite their concerns, mental health is an area where men are reluctant to seek professional help. Depression, in particular, is an issue many men feel “significantly less comfortable” discussing with their doctor.

Barbara Hocking, Executive Director of SANE Australia, a national mental health charity, says, “Both men and women experience mental health issues including stress and depression but women are far better at going to see their doctor to talk about the problem.” Nonetheless she believes this situation is gradually changing.

“Mental health issues pose a key challenge for men though a plea for help is increasingly being seen as a sign of strength. Among the 79% of men who report having a health problem, 1 in 3 (33%) experience stress. A further 20% suffer from depression. Mental health issues also present concerns for the future - 31% of men worry that they will experience stress as they age. One in four (25%) are concerned about experiencing depression at some point. Despite their concerns, mental health is an area where men are reluctant to seek professional help. Depression, in particular, is an issue many men feel “significantly less comfortable” discussing with their doctor. Barbara Hocking, Executive Director of SANE Australia, a national mental health charity, says, “Both men and women experience mental health issues including stress and depression but women are far better at going to see their doctor to talk about the problem.” Nonetheless she believes this situation is gradually changing.

In any year, up to one in five Australians experience a mental health problem. Around one in six Australian men suffer from depression at any given time.

Hocking explains, “There’s a lot of encouragement for men to discuss mental health issues. We’re gradually moving away from a situation where men feel it is a sign of weakness to admit they have a problem and seek help, to regarding it as a sign of strength.”

In terms of managing stress, Hocking says: “For many men it is a question of identifying stressful situations before they occur and either avoiding them or developing a personal coping strategy.” However ongoing action is essential in many areas of men’s mental well-being. Hocking points out that the number of suicides is highest among men aged 35 to 49, while the rate of suicide per capita is greatest among men aged 85-plus. She says, “This is a situation we must redress. There is still significant work to be done in terms of improving the language we use to discuss mental health issues and developing the skills of the medical profession to treat this area of men’s health.”

The use of prescribed medicine to enhance men’s erectile performance has become socially acceptable. The majority of Australian men (85%) would be prepared to take medicine if they had problems with their erections. However this apparent widespread acceptance comes with strings attached. Only 44% of men would “definitely” speak to their doctor if they were experiencing problems with sexual performance.

There are a variety of reasons why men are reluctant to discuss erectile issues with their doctor. Embarrassment (63%), a belief that sex is unimportant (24%) and a perception that there are “other more important issues to deal with” (21%) are all factors that prevent men speaking with their GP about erectile problems. A further 18% of men don’t regard their doctor as the right person to discuss the problem with.

Renowned sex therapist Dr Rosie King, says, “It’s important to realise that problems with erections are very common, and men shouldn’t hesitate to talk to the doctor about it. Doctors are trained to deal with sexual difficulties and safe, effective treatments are available.” Nonetheless Dr King says some men are concerned that their doctor might be embarrassed to talk about this sensitive subject, while others

ERECTION PROBLEMS?

No problem

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fear a doctor might dismiss it altogether as unimportant compared with other more pressing health concerns.

To start a discussion about ED, Dr King says many doctors use a simple five item questionnaire that is filled out in the waiting room or during the consultation by the patient and identifies which men are experiencing erection problems. This simple instrument called the SHIM – Sexual Health Inventory for Men – is used throughout the world to help patients and doctors broach the subject of erectile dysfunction.

“Other doctors put up posters on the walls or provide pamphlets in their waiting rooms about ED – the aim is to encourage the patient with ED to speak up about his sexual difficulties,” adds Dr King.

Pfizer research suggests there is still plenty of work to be done as seeking medical help can be a real stumbling block for men.

In a recent Pfizer survey 8% of men said they currently experience prostate problems,23 and a further 31% say they worry about suffering a prostate-related condition in the future.24

Good reasons to be concerned

Just how real are the concerns over prostate problems? Although not every prostate problem points to cancer, figures from the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia (PCFA) indicate that prostate cancer is a significant men’s health issue.

Around 3,300 Australian men die of prostate cancer each year - 20,000 new cases of prostate cancer are expected to be diagnosed in 2010 alone,25 making it the the most common cancer in Australian men.26

Two simple tests offer early detection of prostate cancer – a Digital Rectal Examination (DRE), and a Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) blood test. Both can be performed by a GP, but only about 10% of men aged between 50 and 70 undertake these tests.27

There are two possible reasons behind the lack of action. PCFA figures show only 52% of men feel well-informed about prostate cancer,28 so awareness of these tests may be low.

In addition, Pfizer research confirms that men are often reluctant to discuss prostate issues with their GP. Only 36% of men feel “extremely comfortable” discussing prostate issues with their doctor, while 15% are “uncomfortable”.29

PROSTATE
focus of a generation

Increased publicity surrounding prostate cancer has raised awareness of the condition among all Australians - men and women

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The majority of men say they eat well, sleep well and exercise regularly. But the benefit of these good habits could be outweighed by the bad.

Pfizer research suggests many Australian men adopt a sensible approach to personal health and well-being. On a weekly basis, 66% of men socialise with family and friends, 59% watch what they eat and 55% feel they get enough sleep. These are positive steps, though it’s worth noting that men do lag behind women on each of these scores.

One area where men fare especially well is regular exercise. Among the respondents, 59% of men said they exercise for 30 minutes or more at least three times a week compared to 52% of women.

For all the good work being done, men are more likely than women to indulge in health threatening behaviour. Almost 1 in 4 men (23%) smoke cigarettes compared to 18% of women. One in 5 men (20%) consume alcohol daily (compared to 12% of women), and 22% of men consume over six alcoholic drinks on any one occasion (versus 8% of women).

These findings are in line with other research showing that around three quarters of Australia’s heavy drinkers (those who consume 22 or more glasses of alcohol in a seven day period) are male and only one quarter are female.

Heavy drinkers are also more likely to be smokers. Almost four out of ten (39%) of male heavy drinkers smoke compared with the overall 23% of the total male adult population who smoke.

These numbers highlight that heavy alcohol consumption among men often co-exists with other risk-taking behaviours such as smoking.

Dr Rosie King, an internationally acclaimed sex therapist, says, “Men in a relationship often take better care of their health than single men, and this tends to reflect the encouragement of their partners to follow a healthy lifestyle and see a doctor if health issues occur. Not surprisingly perhaps, married men tend to live longer than single men.”

Pfizer’s research found men whose relationships have spanned six to ten years suffer from higher stress than those in longer-term relationships, but have fewer problems with erections. However Dr King notes, “All men will experience erectile dysfunction at some point. Even younger men in their twenties may experience ED as a result of the anxiety of being with a new partner or having too much to drink but more typically erection problems are related to advancing age and illness rather than the length of time in a particular relationship.”

“International research has shown that over 50% of men aged between 40 and 70 experience some problems with erections” adds Dr King. “By age 60 around 60% of men will experience ED. This figure rises to about 70% by age 70.”

Dr King says, “Men who look after their bodies – eating well, not smoking, exercising and moderating alcohol intake are less likely to have ED. A smoker aged in his fortieths for example is 2.5 times more likely to experience erectile dysfunction. Simple lifestyle changes can help prevent erection problems.”

IS LOVE THE KEY?

Being part of a relationship is good for our health

One in five (20%) Australians who are in a relationship report having very good health compared to 15% of singles.
ED COULD BE THE SIGNAL
men need to improve their wellbeing

A significant majority (85%) of men have concerns about their future health prospects, however as luck would have it Erectile Dysfunction can be an early warning sign of underlying health issues.40

Future health concerns are slightly different to those they might be experiencing now and the conditions they are most worried about include: heart problems (41%), weight problems (40%), high cholesterol (32%), prostate problems (31%) and stress (31%).41

The biggest concern men have about their health in the future is heart problems.42 Renowned sex therapist Dr Rosie King advises, a common physical problem associated with eD is cardiovascular disease.

“The good news is that Erectile Dysfunction can be an early warning sign of underlying health issues, so it’s certainly not something to ignore.”

Dr King explains that the process causing hardening of the coronary arteries also operates in the arteries of the penis.

“The arteries in the penis are 1-2mm in diameter, while the coronary arteries are significantly wider at 3-4mm,” says Dr King. “This means if the arteries are going to block up, the smaller arteries in the penis will block first and cause erection problems years before the man has his heart attack.

“This means that in a man who develops erectile dysfunction, ED might be the first and only sign that this fellow is at risk of having a serious cardiovascular event such as a heart attack or stroke in the future.”

Dr King adds the period between the advent of ED and a major cardiovascular event is often two - three years up to five years.

She explains, “It’s a bit like the historic use of caged canaries as early warning signals in coal mines. A canary in distress indicated a serious problem with the air underground, and it was a warning sign for the miners to get out. ED is the ‘canary in the coalmine’ of men’s cardiovascular health. It has been firmly established that ED can be closely linked to a man’s underlying health, and problems with erections may be the first symptom of a more serious condition like diabetes, heart disease or high blood pressure.”

The good news is that more doctors are beginning to recognise the link between ED and cardiovascular disease. “The onset of ED gives doctors the opportunity to aggressively intervene and minimise risk factors by lowering cholesterol, controlling blood pressure and encouraging smoking cessation, weight loss, regular exercise and a healthy diet,” says Dr King.
TIPPING THE SCALES towards obesity

The majority of Australian men (59%) watch what they eat, however 41% of men take a more carefree attitude to their diet, and this can lead to weight problems. Among men who say their health is good, 32% claim to have weight problems. This figure rises to 57% of men who describe their health as poor.

Weight problems also vary with age. Only 27% of 18-19 year olds experience weight problems, this rises to 43% by the time men are aged 50 to 59, then falls back to 33% in men aged 66-plus.

There is no doubt that weight problems can be a serious health threat for men (and women) of all ages. Contrary to popular opinion, men may be more likely than women to be overweight. Figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show that 67% of men are overweight compared with 52% of women.

A 2008 report by Access Economics for Diabetes Australia, found that in 2008, 16.5% of all males are obese – that’s 1.76 million Australian men.

While not all overweight men will become obese, it is worth noting that obesity can have a critical impact on health. Obesity is believed to be responsible for:

- 23.8% of type 2 diabetes;
- 21.3% of cardiovascular disease;
- 24.5% of osteoarthritis; and
- 20.5% of colorectal, breast, uterine and kidney cancer.

Along with the cost in human lives, the economic cost of obesity in terms of loss of productivity and health care is estimated at over $8 billion annually in Australia alone.

For further information:
SANE Australia, the National Mental Health Charity
www.sane.org/
Men’s Business
mensbusiness.com.au (this website is sponsored by Pfizer)

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