



NEWS RELEASE

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Report reveals COVID-19's toll on health of Alberta women

Heightened stress, mental health issues, cancelled medical appointments combine to create a crisis facing women's health

A new report authored by the [Alberta Women's Health Foundation](#) (AWHF) reveals COVID-19's devastating toll on Alberta women's health. *Finding the Fractures: The Pandemic, Women's Health Disparities, and the Path to Equity* shows the pandemic has exacerbated historical inequities in women's health.

"We know women's health has been undervalued and underfunded for generations, and that has led to barriers to accessing health care, misdiagnoses and poor health outcomes for women in this province," says Sharlene Rutherford, CEO of the AWHF. "Over the last 19 months, the COVID-19 pandemic has jeopardized women's health even further."

The AWHF report includes the results of a survey of 1,657 Albertans, nearly three-quarters of which were women. The survey found 63 per cent of women reported pandemic stress was negatively affecting their physical health; 11 per cent of women experienced thoughts of harming themselves; and eight per cent were diagnosed with a mental health disorder during the pandemic.

The AWHF report also shows the pandemic has created barriers preventing women from getting the care they need. In the early months of the pandemic, an estimated 41,180 mammograms were paused, and nearly 60,000 Pap tests for cervical cancer were postponed.

Dr. Jane Schultz, Chair at the University of Alberta Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, has seen first-hand how missed obstetrics and gynecology appointments can lead to complications that turn a minor issue into a major health problem.

"Because of delays in routine appointments, women are coming into my clinic with advanced stages of uterine bleeding, prolapse, endometriosis and gynecologic cancers. As a result, their conditions are harder to treat, and the chance of a cure or positive outcome is less."

Dr. Stephanie Liu, a family physician, has seen the issues identified in the AWHF report impact her own patients.

"Many parents are struggling," says Dr. Liu. "One of my patients has a history of depression. Her mental health has deteriorated dramatically over the course of the pandemic, all while trying to manage her four-year-old daughter's changes in behaviour and financial struggles."

Mothers are among those shouldering the heaviest emotional burden of social isolation. Research indicates the number of moms who self-identify as experiencing depression and anxiety more than doubled from pre-pandemic levels. Women, who worked double the unpaid hours in household duties compared to men prior to the pandemic, have also taken on more childcare and elder care due to the pandemic.

"We know that navigating COVID-19 at home is affecting women's career opportunities," Rutherford says. "More than 40 per cent of respondents in our survey told us they were considering working fewer hours and 25 per cent were considering leaving the workforce altogether."

Support from Albertans needed more than ever

The AWHF is advocating for the government to prioritize women in pandemic recovery plans and for businesses to invest in women's health research, which offers significant community health and well-being returns. The foundation is also calling on Albertans to step up as champions for women's health by talking about it, and pushing for more flexibility in the workplace and greater support at home for working mothers.

"Women's health research affects the quality of life for half of this province. We have all seen the toll this pandemic has taken on the women around us: our sisters, mothers, daughters, and friends," says Rutherford. "Let's not waste this opportunity to demand more for them, and for ourselves."

The survey—focused on the unique challenges in women's health in Alberta during the pandemic—was conducted May 3 - May 25, 2021 by Y station. A total of 1,657 respondents completed an online survey, with 72% of survey respondents identifying as female.

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To download the full report and infographics related to survey findings [click here](#).

For more information:

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BACKGROUNDER

Women's Health by Numbers

17.9 – Billions of additional dollars that could be contributed to Canadian economy by investing in women's health.

310 – Estimated diagnoses of advanced stage breast cancer in Canada projected to be caused by three-month interruption in breast cancer screening early in the pandemic.

80 – Approximate percentage of patients diagnosed with autoimmune diseases that are women.

70 – Percentage of women who do not mention mental health concerns to their doctor out of fear of judgment.

38.8 – Percentage of subjects in research studies on non-sex specific cancers that are women, even though lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in women.

35 – Average number of unpaid hours of work Alberta women clock each week in their homes and others.

The Alberta Women's Health Foundation

The Alberta Women's Health Foundation (AWHF) aims to foster equity in women's health, close gaps that exist in research today, connect pathways from lab to life, and advance clinical care at the Lois Hole Hospital for Women, Alberta's only dedicated women's hospital. An initiative of the Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation, the AWHF supports 200 researchers at the Women and Children's Health Research Institute (WCHRI), whose research projects focus specifically on women's health.

A long history of challenges in women's health

The pandemic has created a crisis in women's health, but the barriers and inequities in access, diagnosis and treatment have existed for decades. Prior to 1990, women were not included in clinical trials, meaning they were diagnosed, treated and prescribed medication based on data derived from tests on male subjects. Today, women are still underrepresented in clinical trials and medical research, and funding for these projects is limited. The need for research is urgent. Beyond the pandemic health issues outlined in our report, more women experience anxiety, depression, dementia, osteoporosis, autoimmune conditions, stroke, migraines, thyroid diseases, urinary tract infections, bladder control issues, and breast cancer than men.

Eliminating barriers to improving women's health

In conversation:

- By normalizing discussions around mental health.
- By becoming comfortable talking about women-specific health issues.
- By asking questions and talking about women's health experiences.

At home:

- By more evenly sharing unpaid duties such as childrearing or family support
- By acknowledging a new or expectant mother's increased risk for depression and anxiety....

At work:

- By implementing and promoting flexible work policies that accommodate caregiving responsibilities and medical appointments.
- By bolstering mental health resources and supports for all.
- By not judging those with employment gaps or entering new careers.

In the exam room:

- By asking the right questions, listening, and not dismissing.
- By promoting improved screening techniques for gender-based trends and concerns.

In policy:

- By investing in women's health research.
- By mandating the inclusion and analysis of sex and gender in health research.
- By prioritizing women in pandemic recovery plans.