



## Dimensions of Women's Health across the Lifespan

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### ABSTRACT

*Objective:* This teaching strategy provides students with an opportunity to promote women's health literacy via construction of a creative health information booklet. Students will be able to: (1) Identify health issues that affect women during one particular lifespan stage; (2) Categorize issues according to the seven dimensions of health; (3) Highlight disparities; and (4) Discuss various influences/implications. *Target Audience:* This strategy is geared towards high school/collegiate students enrolled in health and/or disease courses.

### INTRODUCTION

Women's health has evolved over time and encompasses special needs and concerns that merit exploration. "Women's health involves a woman's emotional, social, spiritual, and physical well-being and is determined by the social, political, and economic context of her life, as well as biology."<sup>1</sup> In 2006, females represented 50.8% (151,963,545) of the total U.S. population.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the life expectancy gap between females and males is evident as females are living longer than males (80.4 years vs. 75.2 years in 2004, respectively).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, because of the interrelated nature of women's health and women's longevity, it is even more critical that we firmly grasp the multitude of health issues that affect women across the lifespan.

*Health concerns across lifespan stages.* Typically, the lifespan is divided into four life stages: adolescents, young adult, midlife, and the senior years.<sup>4</sup> As a woman develops across the lifespan, particular health risks or concerns can become more prevalent. A

lifespan approach to women's health involves recognizing that one's health and well-being occurs over a continuum, while concurrently distinguishing between the various health risks and concerns that emerge and become more prominent during specific lifespan stages.

Throughout any lifespan stage, women should engage in healthy eating, regular exercise and avoid using drugs, alcohol and tobacco.<sup>4</sup> The three leading causes of death for women are heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Major health problems facing the U.S. are largely preventable and the leading causes of death are attributable to lifestyle behaviors (tobacco, poor diet, lack of exercise, illicit drug use, sexual behaviors, motor vehicle crashes, firearms, etc.).<sup>5</sup> In total, 70% of all premature deaths are caused by individual and environmental factors that can be modified.<sup>4</sup>

However, specific health risks within lifespan stages exist, such as adolescents being more at risk for unintentional injuries, young adults being more at risk for sexually

transmitted infections, midlife women being more at risk for life stressors such as caring for their children as well as their aging parents, and women in their senior years being more at risk for Alzheimer's disease.

*Dimensions of health.* Past health research has failed to provide an adequate understanding of the many unique dimensions of women's health. A comprehensive exploration of health incorporates physical, mental, social, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, and environmental dimensions of the lifespan stages. These dimensions incorporate the multifaceted elements of

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health which cannot be ignored and reflect the holistic nature of well-being.

*Health disparities.* Many health differences exist between men and women, which highlight the necessity of conducting research specific to women's health and translating this generated knowledge to the public. For instance, heart disease kills more women than men and affects women approximately ten years later than men; women comprise 80% of osteoporosis individuals; and women are twice as likely to be infected with a sexually transmitted infection.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, much diversity among women and the health issues that they face can be demonstrated by the many differences in "race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic location, sexual orientation, country of origin, and employment status"<sup>4(p.60)</sup> that comprise women living in the U.S. For instance, type 2 diabetes is two-to-four times higher among African-American, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, and Asian/Pacific Islander women than white women.<sup>7</sup>

*Knowledge and skills dissemination.* Health educators can play an important role in raising the awareness of women's health by incorporating information into their lesson plans and assigning class activities that allow students to further examine pertinent women's health issues. This teaching strategy provides students with an opportunity to explore the plethora of women's health concerns that exist across the lifespan within the many dimensions of health.

Currently, there is attention on improving individual health literacy as highlighted in the Institute of Medicine<sup>8</sup> report titled "A Prescription to End Confusion," which focuses on the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. This teaching strategy invites students to focus on health literacy (knowledge and skills) concerning the health-related barriers, prevention, and treatment activities that influence health throughout a woman's lifespan. Through an analysis and synthesis of the most current and pertinent health information, students will create a

knowledge and skills dissemination booklet to promote audience awareness of the multifaceted dimensions of women's health and well-being.

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to: (1) identify health concerns and issues that affect women during one particular lifespan stage; (2) categorize health issues according to the seven dimensions of health (physical, mental, social, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, and environmental); (3) highlight the disparities present within the lifespan stage among the identified health issues; and (4) discuss legal, political, economic, and cultural influences and/or implications among the identified health issues.

### MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

- Library access
- Computer/Laptop
- Internet access
- Construction paper or color paper
- String/ties/binding rings

### TARGET AUDIENCE

The following teaching idea can be incorporated into a high school or collegiate health curriculum. For instance, this teaching idea can be well suited for health and/or disease courses.

#### *Procedure*

Prior to assigning this activity, students should have a firm comprehension of the need for women's health inquiry, including historical dimensions. As an anticipatory set, teachers could ask students to list five achievements in women's health that have directly influenced them or female family members (e.g., Roe v. Wade, domestic violence initiatives, sex discrimination laws in the workplace, HPV vaccine, etc.).

Educate students on the lifespan perspective and the importance of this framework for examining health issues. Define the four lifespan stages (adolescents, young adult, midlife, and the senior years) and provide a few examples of health issues that affect the female population during each of these

four stages. Review the seven dimensions of health (physical, mental, social, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, and environmental) and inform students that these dimensions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as health issues can fall into one or more of these categories. Remind students that health disparities can exist in terms of, but not limited to, age, sex, race/ethnicity, and geographic location. Students should be cognizant of the disparities that are present within their identified health issues and such disparities should be discussed in their projects. Discuss with students how legal, political, economic, and cultural facets can play important roles with health issues as well. Depending on the grade and intellectual level of your class, this last section is optional.

Students are to create an educational and informative booklet for the public, which addresses health risks and concerns of women targeting one particular stage of the lifespan. Ask students to provide one major relevant/current health issue for each of the seven dimensions of health. The creative booklet should address the concerns/risks and include up-to-date facts and statistics for each issue chosen issue. Visuals such as diagrams, charts and/or graphs should be included to disseminate information to the reader. Each health issue should include a concise summary of its background and stated prevention and treatment modalities. Students should offer useful resources such as organizational contact information (i.e., American Heart Association) and/or website addresses that further explore the issue. Furthermore, each health issue summary should include a brief analysis of any legal, political, economical, and/or cultural influences/implications for that particular lifespan stage. The checklist of these booklet components to be included is described in the rubric (Table 1).

#### *Assessment Technique*

The women's health issues teaching idea raises students' awareness of important health issues while allowing students to critically think about these issues from their multiple antecedent factors and their respec-

**Table 1. Assessment of Women's Health Stage of Lifespan**

Assessment Criteria	Proficient (5 pts)	Partially Proficient (4-3 pts)	Not Proficient (2-1 pts)
<b>Content</b>			
1. Identify major health issues for particular lifespan stage.			
2. Categorize major relevant/current health issues according to the seven dimensions of health (one for each dimension).			
3. Include well-summarized explanations (background for issue; prevention/treatment modalities), relevant, informative.			
4. Include current facts and statistics.			
5. Utilize variety of visuals (diagrams/pictures/charts/graphs, etc.).			
6. Highlight disparities present among health issues by providing concise and accurate summaries.			
7. Offer useful contact names/addresses/online resources for prevention/treatment, etc.			
8. Discuss legal, political, economic and cultural influences/implications of each health issue.			
9. Promote healthy advocacy pursuits by creating positive public awareness of health issues and related factors specific to chosen lifespan stage.			
<b>Organization, Creativity, &amp; Mechanics</b>			
10. Include creative cover page; visible sections for each dimension; creativity; overall coherency for reader; spelling and grammatical accuracy; adhere to APA style format.			
Total:	/ 50		

tive social consequences. The assessment of this teaching idea is grounded in the stated objectives and rearticulated in the rubric, and the final product should reflect such requirements. The rubric should be provided to the students ahead of time to help guide their research and construction of the final health-literate booklet product (Table 1). The rubric is designed to be utilized in its entirety; however, it can be easily modified and/or adapted to your selected criteria and learning objectives, as well as the student level and the focus and scope of the class.

### CONCLUSION

Activism towards women's health has increased drastically over the past decades and continues to influence our health care system. It has been recognized that a greater amount of attention is needed to improve health research and services for the growing female population. Health educators can play a significant role in helping to raise awareness that surrounds women's health and produce health-literate individuals.

Addressing women's unique health issues and concerns to students can promote

a greater appreciation of the gender-related health differences. By providing insights into the enhancement of women's health and well being, individuals can become empowered, skilled and knowledgeable health care consumers. Health education activities that explore the complexity of health concerns that exist within a women's world, can become a powerful force for change towards equity and wellness.

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