



# Gender and Health



**The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is the Government of Canada's agency for health research. Through CIHR, the Government of Canada invested approximately \$40.9 million in 2006-07 across Canada in research on gender and health.**

## The Facts

- Women experience more illness, more years of disability and more stress than men, but they also live longer. Even when diagnosed with a fatal disease, women survive longer than men.
- Life expectancy for females born in 2002 was 82.1 years, compared with 77.2 years for males. Between 1979 and 2002, life expectancy for males improved by 5.8 years while that of females improved by 3.3 years.
- Women are more likely than men to consider overall health and weight when choosing food, while men are more likely to engage in vigorous activity during their leisure time. As of 2004, 65% of males and 53% of females in Canada were considered overweight or obese based on the Body Mass Index or BMI.
- By age 65, 77% of men and 85% of women have at least one chronic condition. Arthritis is the most prevalent chronic condition.
- In 2002, more than 600,000 Canadians were dependent on alcohol and nearly 200,000 were dependent on illicit drugs. Men are more likely than women to drink heavily and use illicit drugs.
- A person's age and gender have a remarkable influence on their likelihood of experiencing poverty. Women, the young and the elderly are at the greatest risk of living in poverty. In fact, children and youth are over-represented in this group, accounting for more than 40% of the poor population.
- Between 1999 and 2003, 7% of women and 6% of men were victims of spousal abuse, representing an estimated 653,000 women and 546,000 men.



## About CIHR

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is the Government of Canada's agency for health research. CIHR's mission is to create new scientific knowledge and to catalyze its translation into improved health, more effective health services and products, and a strengthened Canadian health-care system. Composed of 13 Institutes, CIHR provides leadership and support to more than 11,000 health researchers and trainees across Canada.

# Finding Solutions

## Drinking and depression

Having a few drinks too many could be a sign that you are feeling blue, especially if you're a woman. CIHR-supported researcher Dr. Kathryn Graham of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto has found that there is a stronger link between depression and binge drinking in women than in men. As part of an international study on alcohol abuse, Dr. Graham and her colleagues surveyed more than 14,000 Canadians to see if there is a link between depression and drinking alcohol. While both men and women who had symptoms of depression were more likely to binge drink (i.e., have more than five drinks on a single occasion), this trend was stronger in women. These results could lead to a greater understanding of the connection between drinking and mental illness.

## Gender matters when it comes to the heart

Female heart attack patients may not be receiving enough of a common, life-saving medication. According to a recent study by Dr. Louise Pilote, a CIHR-funded researcher at McGill University, women need higher dosages of cholesterol-lowering drugs known as statins to receive the same benefits as men. Patients who have recently suffered a heart attack often take statins to prevent a second cardiovascular event. Early clinical trials of statins contained very few women as part of the study group, and some researchers suspected that there may be sex differences in the effects of the drugs. The results of Dr. Pilote's study now confirm that these differences exist and need to be addressed.

## Men as caregivers

What types of support do male caregivers find helpful? Dr. Anne Neufeld of the University of Alberta has been interviewing men caring for ailing wives or parents to find out. The number of people suffering from Alzheimer's disease is on the rise, and a growing number of men are stepping up to provide long-term care for close relatives with dementia. Dr. Neufeld's studies have provided a number of insights into the male caregiver's experience. For instance, many of these men find that the well-meaning assistance of friends, family and professionals is often unhelpful. Dr. Neufeld's findings will help experts create assistance programs and policies to meet the needs of men.



## The Researchers

### Dr. Marlene Moretti – Helping girls find healthy solutions to conflict

Are girls getting more violent, or is violence among teen girls just getting more attention than it used to? Dr. Marlene Moretti, a CIHR-supported researcher at Simon Fraser University, frequently hears this question and says both answers are true.

"There are data to show that the rates of violence are increasing. Girls are still lower than boys on serious violent crime, but there is something that is there, and we need to understand why," says Dr. Moretti.

She and other researchers are taking a closer look at examples of social aggression, such as excluding someone from a group, telling damaging lies or embarrassing another person in public. All of these behaviours are more common among girls than boys. Social aggression has serious implications for both victims and victimizers, who may end up being

ostracised and rejected by their peer group when their aggressive behaviour backfires.

How a girl's caregivers (e.g., her parents, teachers or mentors) handle conflict and the amount of emotional support they provide can have an impact on how that girl will respond to aggression.

For example, even though teens excel at provoking conflict with the adults around them, they still need to feel secure in their relationships with these caregivers. Lack of security or empathy from caregivers can derail an adolescent's emotional development and contribute to aggressive behaviour. Girls seem to be particularly sensitive to problems in relationships with their caregivers.

"The take-home message is that we need to learn how to use our relationships to help kids learn non-aggressive ways to deal with conflict in their own relationships," says Dr. Moretti.

