

natureOUTLOOK

WOMEN'S HEALTH

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What does 'women's health' really mean? Men and women tend to get the same diseases, so it is tempting to think that the term is synonymous with reproductive health. In that case, researchers concerned with women's health should focus mainly on such issues as how to prevent maternal deaths during childbirth (see page S20), whether disruption of the vagina's microbiota can lead to premature delivery (S12), and whether the trend towards early puberty and menstruation is worrisome (S10). These are certainly important concerns. But women also differ from men in their non-reproductive health — in how they respond to these shared diseases — in ways that are often ignored.

Some of the divergence occurs way down at the cellular level, where having two X chromosomes turns out to affect not only a person's biological sex, but also their susceptibility to obesity and cancer, among other disorders (S6). Physiological differences between males and females cause women to have a much higher risk of life-threatening fracture from osteoporosis (S15) and to be affected by more diverse forms of heart disease (S9). Differences in arousal and desire are no surprise, but only now are they being studied rigorously in women (S2).

The call to increase the number of women (and female lab animals) in research is more than a demand for equality. It is essential to find treatments that will work effectively and safely in the entire population (S18). To succeed, such research must be culturally sensitive, taking local customs into account, as investigators in sub-Saharan Africa have learned (S4).

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Michelle Grayson

Senior editor, supplements

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