

Childless women at greater risk of poor health, study finds

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(Medical Xpress) -- Childless women may experience poorer health and wellbeing than the general Australian female population, according to the results of a Deakin University study.

Deakin health researchers examined the physical and mental health and wellbeing of 50 childless women during the latter part of their reproductive years and considered their health and wellbeing in comparison to the Australian female [adult population](#), including women with and without children. The findings are published [online](#) at BioMed Central.

The results indicate that while childless women may experience better physical functioning when compared to the Australian female adult population, they may also experience poorer [general health](#), vitality, social functioning and mental health.

"While the results of our study might not paint a rosy picture, they do not mean that childlessness is a health hazard for women," explained Dr Melissa Graham, a researcher with Deakin's School of Health and Social Development.

"These findings may be a reflection of a number of different factors.

"Poorer health among childless women may mean they are less likely to have children, rather than their poor health being a result of their childlessness.

"Distinguishing health and wellbeing according to women's reasons for childlessness is also important however our current study sample was too small to do this."

Dr Graham suggests that the health of childless women may be compromised by the pressures placed on women to become mothers.

"Australia is predominantly a society where motherhood is encouraged," Dr Graham said.

"This is despite an increase in the number and proportion of women remaining childless.

"Our previous research, along with that by others, with women who did not have children suggested that childlessness is perceived predominantly negatively and this may have consequences for the health of childless women.

"If childlessness was reframed as a natural and familiar way of being the apparent negative health consequences of being a childless woman may be addressed.

"Childlessness should be accepted as an appropriate outcome of adult life for women and motherhood should not be the only valued position."

The Deakin researchers are now looking to undertake a larger scale study to more fully understand how women come to be childless, their experiences of marginalisation, stigmatisation and social exclusion, and their health and wellbeing.

"While motherhood has been the focus of much research, little is known about the health and wellbeing of women who do not have children," Dr Graham said.

"By better understanding childless women's health and wellbeing we will be better able to ensure that their health needs are being met both now and into the future."

Most women in the study were in a relationship with 42 per cent married and 32 per cent currently not in a relationship. Almost half the women (46.7 per cent) did not wish to have children and 11.1 per cent identified themselves or their partner as infertile.

Women in this study reported poorer general [health](#) , vitality, social functioning and [mental health](#) when compared to the female population. However, these women also reported better physical functioning than for the female adult population.

The researchers also found that there was no difference in these women's body mass index, fruit consumption or smoking when compared to the female adult population. However, childless women in this study were almost 12 per cent more likely to consume five serves of vegetables per day than the female population.

Provided by Deakin University

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