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**THE NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF HEALTH: A TOOL FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**


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**Abstract :**Empowerment and opportunities to experience power and control in one's life contribute to health and wellness. Empowerment of women is associated with several key health indicators. The task of saving the lives of millions of women and female children throughout the world, who die every year from easily prevented illnesses, is daunting. The outrage provoked by so many needless deaths, however, can now be tempered by hope because demands for better health care and improved quality of life for all females are being voiced by communities, health personnel, researchers and policy makers. In all societies economic policies, such as those that enslave women in low-wage jobs under dangerous conditions, and development strategies, like those that take land out of subsistence farming and put it into cash crops, have a profound effect on the health status of women and their families. Even within the family disparities exist because of social and cultural bias. For example, preference for the son can lead to the daughter's being given less food. The girl child is also expected to do more work and has less access to education and medical care than the boy. Consequently girls are often ill-prepared to marry and bear children, which they do before they are physically, psychologically and financially equipped to take on the responsibility. Often premature marriage begins a vicious cycle of malnutrition, where underweight mothers have underweight babies who are at risk of suffering from nutritional and educational deprivations. Women's empowerment and equality is a fundamental human right and critical to achieve development objectives, including health. Women with greater agency are more likely to have fewer children, more likely to access health services and have control over health resources. Their children are more likely to survive, receive better childcare at home and receive health care when they need it. At the same time, improved health outcomes for women can help to strengthen their own agency and empowerment. Healthy women are more able to actively participate in society and markets and take collective action to advance their own interests. They are likely to have greater bargaining power and control over resources within the household.

**Key Words:** Empowerment, Health, Equality, Deprivation, Development

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**Introduction:**The Empowerment and autonomy of women, and improvements in their political, social, economic and health status, are recognized by the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) as highly important ends in themselves. In addition, they are seen as essential for the achievement of sustainable development. In this paper I have discussed about the common health problems which may faced by women at various ages. Recognizing that discrimination on the basis of gender starts at the earliest stages in life, it is important that greater equality for girls in regard to health, nutrition and education is the first step in ensuring that women realize their full potential and become equal partners in development.

It is imperative to understand women from a biological point of view i.e., the biology of femaleness. Basically it is just a single pair of chromosomes, which decides the sex of an individual. If both the chromosomes in the pair are alike (XX) the individual is female. If one member of a pair is different from the other (XY) the individual is male. This is purely based on the probability or chance. All female gametes or eggs have a single 'X' chromosome whereas the male gametes or sperms may have either 'X' or 'Y' chromosome. If a 'X' containing sperm fuses with the egg during fertilization it results in female

child whereas a 'Y' carrying sperm will result in a male child after fertilization. Hence you may understand how irrational it is to blame the mother for the sex of the child.

Starting from the 'XX' chromosomal compliment, the femaleness starts getting expressed as the embryo grows and develops into a female child. Primary sex organs appear during the development before birth itself. The secondary sexual characters such as development of breast, or voice change appear only later during puberty i.e., the time the sexual organs become mature and start functioning under the control of hormones secreted by pituitary glands. In female the onset of puberty is marked by Menarche, the first mensus resulting due to the initiation of the first menstrual cycle. This happens somewhere around the age of 10-14 and the cycle keeps repeating every 28 days ordinarily unless there is pregnancy. Around the age of 45-50 the reproductive cycle stops i.e., menopause. In males there are no such reproductive cycles. The production of sperms from puberty is continuous up to 70 years of age or more. It is the women's physiology which changes drastically during her lifetime in relation to her reproductive stages namely- puberty, pregnancy and menopause and also during the different stages of the 28 days menstrual cycle. These changes are under the

control of female sex hormones namely- Estrogen and Progesterone. Hence a woman’s health requirements need to be looked into more carefully in the context of her reproductive stages.

**Health care of women ..... the need:** Death rate, life expectancy and infant mortality rates can be considered as sensitive indicators of the health status of women. Though the overall death rate has been falling over the last few decades, the female to male death rate is more than one up to 35 years both in the urban and rural areas thus implying higher death rate in females. The expectations of life at birth have increased in both the sexes’ in spite of the larger death rates in women. All western countries have higher life expectancy for women than men high infant mortality rates for girl and higher death rates of women in the reproductive period indicate the need for improvement in the health care of female from childhood. It is the neglect of girl baby and lack of adequate health services during pregnancy especially in the rural areas which results in higher mortality rate in females.

**Health care of female fetus and infant:**The major cause of female infant mortality is due to neglect of female child and infanticide practiced still in some rural areas and lately feticide which has come into practice due to the availability of scanning technology. This could be overcome only by changing the attitude of the society towards female child by changing the marriage customs and traditions. Every Indian should commit himself/ herself to eradicate all discriminations against sex whether they originate from religious, sociological or cultural practices. Other cause of infant mortality which is not sex specific e.g. preventable infections could be avoided by the general improvement of basic sanitation and water supply. Educating the mother will greatly improve the health status of infants.

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**Puberty**

Common Health Problems	Symptoms	Preventive Measures/ Cure
Dysmenorrhoea- painful menstruation	Abdominal pain, vomiting, back ache.	a) Avoid mental strain, exposure to cold weather, staying late hours etc. b) Take warm bath when the menstruation starts. c) Persons with problem of constipation take some laxative and clear the bowels just before the start of menstruation. d) Keep hot water bags/ bottles on the lower abdomen and feet. e) Consult doctor for relief if symptoms persist.

**Pregnancy**

Common Health Problems	Symptoms	Preventive Measures/ Cure
Anemia	Head ache, general	Diet rich in iron to be taken.

**Health care during growth and adolescence:**Heights and weights are important indicators of growth and nutritional well being of an individual. The average height of an Indian is much lower than the Westerner. This is not due genetic difference but due to the poor nutritional and health status in our country. Since the growth continues till 16-18 years of age it is essential to take care of one’s health during this crucial phase of life, because any chronic illness, malnutrition or diseases during the period would greatly impair growth in terms of reduced height and weight which is not regain able once the growth period stops. In women, weight increase seems to stop by 16 whereas men reach maximum weights up to 25. This may be attributed to early marriage, overwork, early pregnancy, drain due to breast feeding etc. Adolescence is the period of rapid growth and tremendous activity requiring a well balanced diet. More than boy sit is the adolescent girls whose diet requirements need to be fulfilled because of their future motherhood. Her ability to give birth to a normal healthy child and at the same time retain her own health depends largely up on a favorable nutritional status.

Right age for marriage is another important parameter that needs to be looked into. The ideal age for a woman is between 23 & 25 years. By this time she has completed her growth and is physically mature for marriage and pregnancy. Early pregnancy is a health hazard and will be a drain on women since nutritional supply is needed for her own growth as well as for the growing fetus. Both the mother and child are affected by such pregnancies. A low birth weight baby which is one of the risk factors is common among young and nutritionally deficient mothers. Common health problems during puberty and pregnancy are as follows

	weakness, easily prone to infection getting tired too quickly, problem of bleeding and small weight babies.	
Morning sickness	Nausea within first 3 months.	Consult the doctor for relief if it is extreme.
Toxemias of pregnancy	Increased BP with swelling of loose tissues and albumin in urine. If left untreated it results in eclampsia, headache, disturbances of vision, vomiting, pain in the stomach convulsions and coma.	Should report to the doctor and get proper medical care. It is curable, but if neglected it endangers the mother's life.

**Health care of Adult Women:**Energy requirements have been computed based on body weights, sex, climate and work done. The minimum amount needed i.e Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR) for a man is slightly higher than that of a woman. But specific

research groups have shown that the requirements for women is higher than that of men as women's activities are much more spread over a longer time period.

**Intake of food vs. activity for Men and Women**

Activity	Calorie expenditure/ day	
	Man	Woman
A. Domestic	711	1010
B. Agriculture	334	255
C. Other Activities	878	715
D. Rest and Sleep	550	500
<b>Total</b>	<b>2473</b>	<b>2480</b>

As evident from the above data woman's calorie need per day is slightly higher than that of a man. On the contrary the actual intake of nutrients by women seem to be much less all over India (data not shown) than the required recommended levels thus clearly pinpointing the nutritional insufficiency of women in India and the need for nutritional care especially during pregnancy and child birth. One of the causes for high mortality rate in women is the lack of nutritional reserve in their body and they become easily prone to any infection such as Tuberculosis.

welcoming to see at least for the evening meal the whole family sitting together at the table and the mother not waiting on the rest of the family members and eating at last. Women during pregnancy and lactation should be especially cared for since they need excess calories, protein, iron and vitamins.

By and large most Indian women happily give their husband and children the best food available at home and eat the leftovers and sometimes none at all. But fortunately the traditional idea that men should first and be given the best food at home is slowly changing. In some of the modern families, it is

On the contrary it is essential for women to be caution of overweight also. Obesity is the cause for many diseases such as hypertension and diabetes. Moreover it makes women inactive, inefficient and unattractive. Once married and with children Indian women generally pay less attention to the personal appearance and allow excess to accumulate on their bodies. This attitude needs to change. Common health problems which may occur in adult women are as follows:

**Adult Women**

Common Health Problems	Symptoms	Preventive Measures/ Cure
Back ache & Back pain	Includes discomfort in its various forms.	Obesity is the common cause. May accompany menstruation in pregnancy and disease of pelvic organs. Medical advice should be sought.
Migraines	Severe headache limited to one side with vomiting.	Migraine attacks in women may be related to menstruation. May lessen or disappear during menopause. Migraine victims are usually perfectionist who drives themselves towards some goal.

White discharge Dysfunctional uterine bleeding Dyamenorrhoea	Due to some injection or malfunctioning of their reproductive organs.	Should consult doctor
Health problems related to Abortion	Results due to very late abortions. Lack of adequate health services.	Should be done earlier with proper medical advice and care.
Cancer /breast/ uterine/cervical	Enlargement of breasts, any discharge (bloods) from nipple, irregular or profuse bleeding	Any appearance of lump is to be immediately reported to the doctor. Breast removal by surgery. Regular medical checkup is necessary. PAP test for cervical cancer.
Hypertension	More prevalent after 40 years of age. Related to stress in women's life.	Methods of relaxation inspite of 24 hours rush, methods of cutting out of the stress and drudgery and getting on with work need to be identified and spelt out.
Diabetes	Common after 40	Diet restriction and medication.

**Health care of Women at later age (Menopause & post Menopause):**Older persons need fewer calories because of lesser activities and lower metabolic rate. Hence one needs to be cautious of over-eating after crossing 40. The menopause is a critical time and on an average it occurs around the age of 48. Though it is a natural phenomenon in a woman's life it is often accompanied by distressing symptoms such as irregular period which is often too frequent and / or to profuse, headache etc. Normally these symptoms disappear in one or two years and the menstrual cycle stops. The changes are due to the withdrawal of reproductive hormones and sometimes it may be necessary to seek medical advice in case the symptoms persist longer.

**Conclusion:**The Center of Expertise in Women's Health and Empowerment believes that advances in women's health globally are impeded by poverty, limited access to educational and economic opportunities, gender bias and discrimination, unjust laws, and insufficient state accountability. These forces intersect to restrict access to vital women's health services and the information that women need

to improve their lives. Globalization has also had adverse effects on women especially in the developing countries. As consumers, women are increasingly facing a consumer culture which reduces them to commodities and as producers; women are exposed to work exploitation and occupational hazards. Owing to their many roles, as would-be mothers, as mothers responsible for the health of their children and families, as working women at home and outside they are major consumers of healthcare products. In recent years a serious issue has come to light where many products related to women's health, found to be dangerous and banned or restricted in the developed countries, were marketed in the developing countries. Transnational Corporations (TNCs) see the developing world as a convenient dumping ground for these products and medicines. As the author of this paper I have thrown some light on the common illnesses faced by women during various ages. So it is the major responsibility of the women to take care of their health in this era of Globalization.

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