- Women—diseases

Four health issues women should understand

A healthy diet is important to strengthen your bones before they become brittle and break.

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Every woman should understand what key health issues may affect them and how they can stay proactive about their well-being.



It is the unique anatomy, hormones, family history and lifestyle a woman at some point in her life will undergo tests to rule out, confirm, or monitor diseases related to her gynecological and reproductive health: from cancers of the breast, cervix and ovaries to polycystic ovarian syndrome, endometriosis and urinary tract infection.

But such factors make women more vulnerable to certain conditions than men. For example, the natural changes a woman goes through following menopause — less production of estrogen, increased blood pressure and cholesterol levels — put her at risk for heart attack and stroke.

Sheryll Cornejo, MD, an internal medicine consultant at the Makati Medical Center, identifies four other health conditions that affect more women than men, and what they can do to reduce their risks.

Osteoporosis, or the weakening of bones, is a result of decreased estrogen production from menopause, which contributes to bone loss. “Anatomically, women also have smaller, thinner bones than men, putting them at risk for fracture,” points out Dr. Cornejo.

And although osteoporosis is common globally, it is more common among thin women with thin bones. In that case, Asians generally have thinner bones than Caucasian women, therefore, osteoporosis is common among Filipinas.

A healthy diet is important to strengthen your bones before they become brittle and break. It is advised to enjoy a diet that is rich in calcium (dairy products, leafy green vegetables, and fish whose bones you can eat are excellent sources) and vitamin D (get it from early morning sun exposure). Also, engage regularly in strengthtraining and weight-bearing exercises and avoid alcohol and smoking, which have a negative impact on bone health.

Thyroid cancer, or a malignant growth visible and palpable from the base of the neck, is more common among women in their reproductive years. Because thyroid tissue contains estrogen receptors, fluctuations in female hormones can sometimes promote the growth of these cells, which helps explain the gender gap. Other possible causes are a family history of cancer, faulty genes, radiation exposure, a lack of iodine in the diet and obesity.

“While you cannot completely prevent sporadic thyroid cancer, keeping a healthy weight, eating a balanced diet, limiting radiation exposure, and being aware of your family history can minimize your risks,” says Dr. Cornejo. “More importantly, performing regular neck self-examinations help you catch it early and begin treatment as soon as possible.” The prognosis for thyroid cancer among women is good and marked by high survival rates.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic autoimmune disease characterized by pain, inflammation and stiffness in the lining of the joints. Females are two to three times more prone to developing RA. Because women have two X chromosomes — which carry many immune-related genes — they naturally mount stronger immune responses, making them more vulnerable to autoimmune misfires. Furthermore, fluctuating estrogen levels, particularly the sudden drops following pregnancy or during menopause, can trigger the disorder. Others posit that it’s caused by a combination of genetics, smoking, obesity and environmental factors.

Lifestyle changes, explains Dr. Cornejo, can help manage your risk and reduce severe flare-ups if you are genetically predisposed. “Consume a healthy diet of fruits, vegetables and lean protein. Stick to your ideal weight and exercise regularly. Crucially, quit smoking — a major documented trigger for RA — and learn to manage stress.”

Alzheimer’s disease, or the degeneration of the brain due to the accumulation of plaque that destroys healthy brain cells, is diagnosed among more women than men, presumably because women live longer. People with the disease, however, are more likely to have hypertension and diabetes, consume cigarettes and alcohol in excess, live a sedentary life, and have limited social interaction.

“Modifying these risk factors can delay, if not prevent Alzheimer’s disease from developing,” says Dr. Cornejo. “Staying physically and mentally active as well as socializing with family and friends do wonders in keeping the brain stimulated, healthy and happy.”