

Taking charge of your health journey: A guide for women, this Women's Health Week



Read your body's
dashboard

Ask for
directions

Keep yourself fueled
and running well

It's okay to adjust
the route

When it comes to our health, it can sometimes feel as though we're sitting in the passenger seat. We wait for appointments and test results, or for someone else to explain what is happening inside our own bodies.

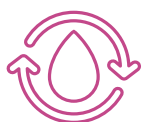
Taking charge doesn't mean having complete control over your health. Bodies change, symptoms can be unpredictable, and answers are not always immediate. Instead, it means becoming an active participant in your healthcare. By noticing changes, asking questions, and speaking up when something doesn't feel right, you can begin to build a clearer picture of your health.

For women, this can be particularly important. Health needs may change with menstrual cycles, pregnancy, perimenopause, menopause, ageing and other life experiences. Women can also become used to putting the needs of family, colleagues and the community ahead of their own.

Read your body's dashboard

Think of your body as having its own dashboard, with signals and indicators that provide valuable information about your health and wellbeing. While these signs may not always be as obvious as a warning light, they can tell you when something isn't quite right.

The important thing is to **become familiar with what is normal for you** and to notice when something changes. Regular health checks can help you better understand your body and identify potential concerns early.



the length, heaviness or regularity of your periods



pelvic pain or discomfort



bladder or bowel habits



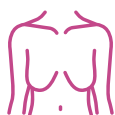
sleep or energy levels



mood, concentration or memory



headaches or migraines



breast health



skin, hair or weight



how your body responds to exercise or recovers after a shift

Change doesn't automatically mean that something is wrong. However, keeping track of patterns can help you explain what you are experiencing and decide whether it is time to seek advice.

For example, changes to periods may be associated with different life stages or conditions such as endometriosis, perimenopause or polyendocrine metabolic ovarian syndrome, (known previously as polycystic ovary syndrome). Symptoms and their causes vary, so changes should be considered alongside your age, health history and other symptoms.

Some health conditions may not cause obvious symptoms. **Regular health checks are therefore important even when you feel well.** [Her Health Check](#), via Jean Hailes, is a free online tool for women in Australia that provides general guidance about the checks you may need based on factors including your age, medical background and risk factors. You can use the report as a starting point for a conversation with your doctor.

Ask for directions

You don't need a diagnosis or a test result to justify paying attention to what you are feeling. If something seems different or is affecting your daily life, it is worth discussing with your general practitioner or another health professional.

Many women become used to explaining away symptoms. We might tell ourselves that we are just tired, stressed, getting older, working difficult hours or simply too busy to deal with it right now. Painful or disruptive symptoms can also become so familiar that they begin to feel "normal".

But common does not always mean something should be ignored or endured. Trust yourself enough to notice, record, and raise it with a health professional.

A simple symptom diary can help:

- what you experienced
- when it happened and how long it lasted
- where you were in your menstrual cycle
- how severe or disruptive the symptom was
- anything that appeared to improve or worsen it
- how it affected your work, sleep, exercise or everyday activities

Before an appointment, write down your main concerns and questions you want to ask. You may also find it helpful to explain how the symptoms are affecting your life, rather than describing the symptoms alone.

For example, you could say:

“This pain is regularly stopping me from exercising or sleeping.”

“My periods have changed and I am struggling to manage them while working.”

“I know stress and shift work can affect sleep, but this feels different from my usual tiredness.”

Sometimes you won't get an answer straight away. Your health journey may involve follow-up appointments, tests, treatment options or a referral to another health professional.

Advocating for yourself isn't being difficult. It's helping your healthcare team understand what is happening and what matters to you.

Keep yourself fueled and running well

Taking charge of your health isn't only about responding when something is wrong. It's also about supporting your body through the changes, pressures and different stages of women's lives.

Nutrition, movement, sleep and recovery all play a part, but women's health is not one-size-fits-all. What supports you may change across your menstrual cycle, during pregnancy, through perimenopause or menopause, following illness or injury, or as your work and caring responsibilities change.

For women working in emergency services, this needs to fit around the realities of rosters, call-outs, operational demands, volunteering and family life. Standard wellness advice can be difficult to apply when your working hours and workload are unpredictable.



Sleep is a good example. Advice to sleep for eight uninterrupted hours each night may not be realistic for shift workers. Current guidance recommends that most healthy adults aim for seven to nine hours of sleep across each 24-hour period. For shift workers, this may be one longer sleep or a main sleep supported by a shorter sleep. The guidance also recommends adapting sleep strategies to your roster, lifestyle, and commitments.

Where possible, protecting your sleep might include

- letting family members know when you need uninterrupted rest,
- making your room darker and quieter, or
- reconsidering non-essential commitments following demanding shifts.

This isn't always easy, but rest is a health need, not a reward for finishing everything else.



Movement is also important, but it doesn't have to mean pushing through a strenuous workout regardless of how you feel. It might be a brisk walk, a team sport, strength training, stretching after a shift, a yoga class, or dancing with the kids in the lounge room.

You may notice that your energy, pain, mood, or recovery varies across the month or during different stages of life. Rather than criticising yourself for not performing at the same level every day, try to work with what your body is telling you. On some days, more challenging exercise may feel good. On others, gentler movement or rest may be the better choice.

The same applies to **food**. Rather than focusing on restriction or trying to eat perfectly, consider what will help sustain your energy and support your health. On busy days, that might mean packing a [nourishing snack](#), eating before a long call-out where possible, or keeping simple options available for the end of a late shift.

Small actions count, especially when a full break or regular routine is not possible. During a shift, self-care might look like:

refilling your
water bottle

stepping outside for
fresh air if you can

taking the
opportunity to
eat rather than
continuing to
put it off

checking in with a
trusted colleague

stretching or
changing position
between tasks

taking your
scheduled break
when operational
demands permit

taking a few slow
breaths before
moving to the
next job

making a note
to book an
appointment rather
than dismissing
a recurring
symptom again

These actions won't remove the pressures of emergency services work, and they're not substitutes for proper rest, healthcare or support. They are practical ways of checking in with yourself and recognising that your health matters too. Wellbeing Support's resource, ['Your Defence System'](#), contains practical and achievable tips to support emergency services workers health and wellbeing.

It's okay to adjust the route

Even when you are actively steering your health journey, there will be days when symptoms flare, energy disappears or your body just doesn't feel like itself.

For many women working in emergency services, caring roles or busy households, checking out for the day is not always possible.

Self-care, however, doesn't always mean stopping altogether. Sometimes it means adjusting the route. Your best today may look different from your best on another day.

It's also important not to assume that you should push through recurring or worsening symptoms. Looking after yourself might mean making an appointment you have postponed, taking appropriate leave, or telling someone you trust that you are struggling.

Support can look different for everyone. It might be:

- a colleague helping you manage a busy period
- a partner or family member taking on more at home
- a friend coming with you to an appointment
- a healthcare professional helping you understand your options
- a wellbeing support officer connecting you with resources and support (including the screening tools and guidance available on MyPulse)

Unpredictability is not a sign that you are managing your health badly. Women's bodies and health needs can change throughout the month and across different stages of life. Listening and responding to those changes is part of taking charge.

Being in the driver's seat doesn't mean pushing through every obstacle alone. It means noticing what's happening, making informed decisions, asking for help, and changing direction when you need to.

References:

- <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/health-topics/pmos/>
- <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/look-after-yourself/how-to-talk-to-your-doctor/>
- <https://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/sleep-topics/healthy-sleep-practices-for-shift-workers>
- <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/look-after-yourself/stay-healthy/exercise-and-staying-active/>

Wellbeing Support 24 Hours 6173 2873
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