



National Women's
Health Resource Center
www.healthywomen.org

Third Annual Health Survey:
Women Talk

Executive Summary
October 2007

Women's Perceptions of Their Health

The third annual *Women Talk* survey reveals that women recognize the importance and value of living a healthy lifestyle now and as they age but need better support, information and resources to incorporate healthy habits into their daily lives and reap the full benefits of having done so. These 2007 findings reinforce trends and themes identified in the previous research in this series and further expand our knowledge about women's perceptions of their health. This year's *Women Talk* survey continues to explore women's attitudes and perceptions toward their health, while more fully examining women's behavior and the steps they take to live a healthy lifestyle for themselves and their families, including what hinders their efforts and their thoughts on what would be most helpful to them. The findings also reinforce earlier reports that women age 60 and older report better health and a more positive outlook as compared to younger women.

Women clearly recognize the importance of living a healthy lifestyle for both themselves and their families, and the majority view it as worthwhile. They largely agree that making small changes in their daily routines can help them improve their health and that taking care of themselves is their top priority. They are motivated by a desire to feel good, increase their energy levels and prevent disease; maintain their lifestyle and independence as they grow older; be fit; and look good. And, it's not just talk—nearly nine in ten women already do at least one of the health behaviors examined in the survey, and most women have set goals to eat healthier, exercise more, lose weight and reduce stress.

However, while women have the right attitude and the best intentions, they are falling short. By their own admission, many are not achieving all or most of the goals they have set for themselves, especially as it relates to eating healthier, exercising more and losing weight. Women continue to need help to achieve their goals and reap the benefits of living a healthy lifestyle. They cite lack of time as the top hindrance they face. Perceptions that living a healthy lifestyle is expensive or requires too much effort are also fairly common. While women believe that small steps can be beneficial, they indicate a need for more information on the small steps they can incorporate into their lives to improve their health. They would also find useful a fitness program customized to their age and fitness level.

On a more encouraging note, nearly half of women report their health habits and lifestyle across their mental, physical or spiritual health are very healthy. They report better health, have a more positive outlook and are more likely to be achieving their goals. The importance of regular exercise, specifically, is apparent. Women living a very healthy lifestyle are more likely to report exercising regularly and, along with other women who exercise, report that it is the action that has had the biggest positive impact on their health.

This tension between good intentions and good implementation described above also exists when examining women's attitudes toward growing older, a new topic area for this body of research. Overall views toward growing older are mixed. Nearly two in five are optimistic, countered, however, by an underlying sense of worry, anxiety and uncertainty. Fewer than half of women think it is likely they will maintain their independence as they grow older and, along with memory loss, losing their independence is one of the things women most fear about aging. Not surprisingly, views toward aging change over the lifespan. Despite a greater fear of losing one's memory or independence, older women, who have reached some of these milestones, generally have a more positive outlook than younger women.

Key Findings

Evaluation of Overall Health

On the whole, women rate their physical and mental health as very good to excellent. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 means “excellent” and 1 means “very poor,” on average women rate their physical health a 7.3 and their mental health an 8.5. These findings are consistent with data from prior years.

While women 60 and older evaluate their physical health similarly to younger women, they evaluate their mental health higher than younger women. On average women 60 and older evaluate their mental health as a 9.1 on a 10-point scale versus 7.9 for women 18 to 39.

TABLE 1: Physical and Mental Health by Age and Race/Ethnicity – Mean Scores

	Mean Physical Health	Mean Mental Health
Total	7.3	8.5
Age		
18–29	7.2	7.9
30–39	7.2	7.9
40–49	7.4	8.7
50–59	7.4	8.7
60+	7.1	9.1
Race/Ethnicity		
White	7.3	8.4
African-American	7.3	8.9
Hispanic	7.2	8.3

When asked what being healthy means to them, nearly half (47%) of women said “not having any chronic diseases” and 43% said “being physically active.” Younger women (18–29 year olds) more commonly associate being healthy with being physically active (45%); being happy (42%); and eating healthily (42%); while those over 60 more commonly mention having spiritual well-being (38%) as being healthy. As compared to white women, happiness is more indicative of being healthy for both African-American and Hispanic women (33% vs. 43% each) and spiritual well-being is of particular relevance to African-American women (44% vs. 26% of Hispanics and 25% of whites).

Attitudes Toward a Healthy Lifestyle

Many women think living a healthy lifestyle is important and worthwhile. Very few associate living a healthy lifestyle with negative descriptions. On an aided basis, the most common ways women describe living a healthy lifestyle are important (61%) and worthwhile (59%). Essential (44%), challenging (38%) and fun (23%) are other common associations with living a healthy lifestyle. Very few women chose negative descriptions such as difficult (11%), deprivation (3%), boring (2%) or waste of time.

Women recognize that taking care of themselves is not just good for themselves but also beneficial to their families. Women also recognize that small changes can help them improve their health.

More than four in 10 women (43%) strongly agree that “living a healthy lifestyle is important for both my own health as well as the health of my family.”

African-American and Hispanic women are more likely than white women to recognize the impact they can have on their health and the health of their families. They are more likely to strongly agree with nearly all statements about living a healthy lifestyle, particularly that living a healthy lifestyle is important for their own health as well as the health of their family; that making small changes can help improve their health; and that making time for themselves is one of the best ways they can help to take care of themselves and their families.

Evaluation of and Motivators for Living a Healthy Lifestyle

Women are motivated to lead a healthy lifestyle to feel good, be independent and look good. Large majorities of women are motivated to feel good (84%), increase energy levels (75%), prevent disease (65%), maintain their lifestyle as they grown older (65%), be fit (63%), maintain their independence (63%) and look good (63%). Other commonly mentioned motivators include losing weight (57%), increasing one’s life span (57%), preventing disability (52%) and being around for others who depend on them (50%).

Older women are more motivated to maintain their lifestyle and independence, whereas younger women are more motivated to be fit and look good.

TABLE 2: Motivating Factors by Age

	Age					
	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
Feel good	84%	85%	85%	84%	80%	86%
Increase energy level	75%	76%	77%	75%	70%	74%
Prevent disease	65%	59%	63%	67%	67%	68%
Maintain my lifestyle as I grow older	65%	54%	52%	66%	61%	84%
Be fit	63%	70%	66%	58%	60%	60%
Maintain my independence as I grow older	63%	39%	42%	65%	70%	91%
Look good	63%	77%	72%	57%	55%	54%
Lose weight	57%	59%	62%	67%	56%	46%
Increase my life span	57%	51%	56%	50%	63%	63%
Prevent disability	52%	36%	42%	50%	62%	68%
Be around for others who depend on me	50%	44%	52%	55%	59%	46%
Set a good example for my family	50%	54%	58%	59%	36%	44%
Sense of accomplishment	49%	57%	43%	50%	47%	46%
Take better care of my family	43%	48%	56%	51%	39%	24%
Concern that my genetics or family history predisposes me to developing a disease	31%	27%	35%	37%	35%	23%
Improve my sex life	24%	36%	28%	26%	21%	10%
Other	2%	3%	2%	4%	2%	1%
Nothing	1%	2%	1%	–	1%	–

Health Behaviors

The survey also explored interest in and participation levels for specific health behaviors and identifies those behaviors that women believe are making the biggest impact on their health.

While many women already do a variety of the health behaviors examined in the survey and report that they benefit from doing so, the findings also reveal that sizeable numbers of women are not currently and are not likely to engage in these kinds of behaviors. By a wide margin, the behavior that has had the biggest impact on women's health is exercising at least 30 minutes a day, three times a week. Thirty-eight percent of women reported doing this, and, of those, two-thirds (67%) say this has the biggest impact on their health. However, more than one-third (37%) of women not currently exercising are not likely to incorporate exercise into their lifestyle, losing some of the associated benefits.

TABLE 3: Already Engage in Health Behavior

Statement	Already Do	
	% Already Do	% Biggest Impact
Read nutrition labels	56%	10%
Look for ways to laugh	51%	14%
Drink more water	50%	22%
Take the recommended dose of vitamins and minerals for someone my age	41%	9%
Move my arms when I walk	41%	2%
Reduce caffeine intake	40%	6%
Avoid foods with trans-fatty acids	39%	5%
Limit sugar intake	38%	9%
Nurture my spirituality or religious beliefs	38%	20%
Wear sunscreen to protect my skin from the sun	38%	3%
Exercise, engaging in at least 30 minutes of moderate activity at least 3 days per week	38%	67%
Take the stairs whenever possible	35%	3%
Eat a varied diet to get all my vitamins and minerals	35%	7%
Park farther away so that I walk more	31%	3%
Make sure to get a good night's sleep	31%	13%
Share food when I eat out	28%	2%
Do something creative such as knitting or writing on a regular basis	27%	9%
Eat whole, natural or organically produced food	23%	9%
Include one health food in my diet (such as tofu, flaxseed, etc.)	23%	1%
Avoid restaurants that do not have healthy choices on the menu	22%	2%
Volunteer my time on a regular basis	21%	8%
Eat 5 or 6 small meals a day	15%	13%

TABLE 4: Likelihood to Engage in Behavior

Statement	Likelihood Among Those Not Currently Doing			
	% Currently Not Doing	% Extremely/Very Likely	% Likely	% Somewhat Not Likely
Read nutrition labels	44%	36%	32%	32%
Look for ways to laugh	49%	58%	28%	14%
Drink more water	50%	55%	27%	17%
Take the recommended dose of vitamins and minerals for someone my age	59%	36%	27%	37%
Move my arms when I walk	59%	38%	33%	29%
Reduce caffeine intake	60%	19%	20%	61%
Avoid foods with trans-fatty acids	61%	41%	29%	30%
Limit sugar intake	62%	28%	31%	42%
Nurture my spirituality or religious beliefs	62%	29%	30%	42%
Wear sunscreen to protect my skin from the sun	62%	38%	25%	37%
Exercise, engaging in at least 30 minutes of moderate activity at least 3 days per week	62%	35%	27%	37%
Take the stairs whenever possible	65%	31%	25%	43%
Eat a varied diet to get all my vitamins and minerals	65%	41%	34%	25%
Park farther away so that I walk more	69%	38%	21%	41%
Make sure to get a good night's sleep	69%	43%	28%	29%
Share food when I eat out	72%	27%	30%	43%
Do something creative such as knitting or writing on a regular basis	73%	26%	24%	50%
Eat whole, natural or organically produced food	77%	28%	27%	46%
Include one health food in my diet (such as tofu, flaxseed, etc.)	77%	19%	22%	59%
Avoid restaurants that do not have healthy choices on the menu	78%	28%	25%	47%
Volunteer my time on a regular basis	79%	22%	20%	58%
Eat 5 or 6 small meals a day	85%	27%	25%	48%

Barriers to a Healthy Lifestyle

Many women set goals to live a healthier lifestyle. However, considerably fewer women are able to meet all or most of the goals they set. Many women have set goals to eat healthier (76%), exercise more (71%) and lose weight (61%). Many women, however, are not meeting all or most of the goals they have set for themselves, particularly as it relates to losing weight, exercising more and eating healthier.

TABLE 5: Setting Goals vs. Achieving Goals

	% Set Goal	% Achieve All or Most of Goal
Eating healthier	76%	54%
Exercising more	71%	42%
Losing weight	61%	24%
Reducing stress	52%	44%
Getting more sleep	40%	39%
Making more time for leisure activities or hobbies	27%	54%

Time or the lack thereof, is the most commonly mentioned hindrance to leading a healthy lifestyle. Other common responses are perceptions that leading a healthy lifestyle requires too much effort or is too expensive. When asked what would help women and their families lead a healthier lifestyle, women report that better information would be most helpful. Two in five (42%) women report not having enough time as a hindrance, a complaint voiced by nearly three-quarters of women younger than 40.

TABLE 6: Self-reported Hindrances to Living a Healthy Lifestyle

	For Self	For Family
Not enough time	42%	23%
It's too expensive	25%	16%
Requires too much effort	21%	12%
I feel guilty taking time for myself	15%	
It's hard to keep track of what I need to do to stay healthy for my age	14%	
I don't have enough support from friends or family	10%	15%
My health insurance doesn't provide adequate incentives	8%	
I don't have reliable child care	3%	1%
Outside demands	2%	12%
Health issues	2%	
Inconvenient location	1%	
Disability	1%	
Lack of motivation/willpower	1%	2%
Too tired/no energy/fatigue/exhaustion	1%	
Bad eating habits/like junk food	1%	
Other	1%	11%
Nothing hinders my efforts	25%	24%

When it comes to helping their families lead a healthy lifestyle, women most commonly mention lack of good food choices as the top hindrance. More than one-third (37%) mention easy access to unhealthy food options and one-quarter (24%) cite lack of healthy quick and easy meal options as hindrances in helping their families lead a healthy lifestyle.

Half of women identify a better understanding of small changes they can make that would have a big impact as information that would help them lead healthier lives. Fully two in five (45%) women think a customized fitness and nutrition program based on age and fitness level would be helpful. Restaurants also have a role to play with sizeable numbers of women reporting that smaller portions (37%) and complete nutrition information (35%) would help them lead a healthier lifestyle.

TABLE 7: Aids to Healthier Living

	Total
Having a better understanding of small changes I can make that will have a big impact on my health	50%
Having a customized fitness and nutrition program based on my age and current fitness level	45%
Restaurants serving smaller portions	37%
Restaurants publishing complete nutrition information on calories, fat, etc.	35%
Health insurance reimbursement for gym membership based on attendance	33%
Understanding how to prepare healthy meals	31%
Having access to a grocery store with a wide variety of fresh foods	25%
Having a network of friends and colleagues to serve as my support system	24%
Employer helping with cost of a gym or providing an on-site gym	22%
Employer allowing employees to exercise during regular work hours	20%
Reliable child care	4%
Other	6%
Nothing would help me and my family	7%

Perspectives on Aging

Overall, women have mixed feelings toward growing older—a good number are optimistic about getting older, particularly older women, but this is tempered by fears about losing one’s independence and one’s memory. More than one-third (37%) of women report being optimistic about getting older, a finding that is especially true for older women (41%–46% among those aged 50 and older). However, fewer than half of women (45%) think it’s extremely or very likely that as they grow older they will maintain their ability to take care of themselves and go about their daily activities.

Generally speaking, some women think various areas of life will be better or worse when they are older, while the majority think each area will be the same as it is now. African-American and Hispanic women are more optimistic than white women; they are more likely to believe nearly all areas of their lives will get better.

TABLE 8: Expectations for Growing Older

Area	Better	About the Same	Worse
Spiritual health	37%	62%	2%
Stress level	37%	53%	10%
Financial life	26%	54%	19%
Outlook on life	25%	68%	7%
Social life	19%	72%	9%
Mental health	18%	75%	7%
Physical health	15%	59%	26%
Sex life	11%	67%	22%
Looks	5%	55%	40%

Age influences perceptions and expectations of aging, both in terms of things women are looking forward to as well as what they fear. Younger women most look forward to time with their spouse or watching their children grow up, while older women most look forward to learning something new. In terms of fears, older women are most concerned about losing their independence or becoming a burden, middle-aged women are worried about finances, and younger women are afraid of being alone.

TABLE 9: What Women Are Looking Forward To

	Age					
	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
More travel	51%	57%	45%	54%	47%	50%
More time with spouse or partner	34%	21%	42%	45%	43%	24%
Having more time for myself	32%	28%	33%	40%	29%	31%
Learning something new	28%	27%	12%	27%	22%	45%
Having more time to pursue a hobby	22%	24%	17%	23%	18%	24%
Seeing my children grow up	18%	16%	47%	23%	8%	-
Spending time with my grandchildren	10%	6%	24%	10%	11%	2%
Having time to pick up a hobby	9%	13%	7%	9%	9%	8%
I am not looking forward to anything	7%	5%	5%	2%	14%	11%
Something else	11%	12%	12%	8%	10%	13%

TABLE 10: What Women Most Fear about Growing Older

	Age					
	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
Losing my memory	35%	33%	33%	33%	30%	41%
Losing my health	35%	38%	38%	29%	31%	34%
Becoming a burden on others	34%	24%	29%	35%	34%	47%
Losing my independence	29%	19%	20%	25%	30%	48%
Being dependent on others	27%	23%	27%	26%	22%	35%
Running out of money	27%	27%	41%	26%	30%	15%
Being alone	19%	34%	23%	12%	15%	13%
Being in a nursing home	18%	15%	17%	13%	17%	25%
Not being able to afford my medical bills	16%	11%	21%	20%	26%	9%
Lack of health insurance	11%	6%	13%	19%	20%	4%
Losing my looks	7%	8%	11%	10%	7%	1%
Something else	2%	6%	2%	1%	1%	*
I am not afraid of anything	5%	8%	2%	6%	2%	4%

Methodology

The research was conducted between April 12, 2007, and April 20, 2007, among 1,126 U.S. adult women ages 18 and older. The surveys averaged 15 minutes in length. With a population of this size the margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points at a 95% confidence interval. The survey was conducted using Harris Interactive's Online Panel (HPOL). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, income, education and region were weighted where it was necessary to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was adjusted for respondents' propensity to be online.



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