

The Study

The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH), widely known as Women’s Health Australia, is a longitudinal, population-based survey, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. The study began in 1996 and is conducted by researchers at the University of Newcastle and the University of Queensland.

The ALSWH involves three large, nationally representative cohorts of Australian women representing three generations: Younger women, aged 18-23 years when first recruited in 1996, Mid-age women, initially aged 45-50 years, and Older women, initially aged 70-75 years.

Features of the study design include:

- Women were randomly selected from the Medicare database and invited to participate in the longitudinal study.
- Women in rural and remote areas of Australia were intentionally over-sampled to ensure adequate numbers for statistical analysis.
- After the baseline survey in 1996, the three age cohorts have been surveyed sequentially, one cohort per year, on a rolling basis since 1998.

Timeline for ALSWH Surveys

	1996	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	→	2016
Younger	☒			☒			☒			☒			
Mid-age	☒	☒			☒			☒				☒	
Older	☒		☒			☒			☒				
	Survey 1	Survey 2			Survey 3			Survey 4			Survey 5		

The study was designed to explore factors that influence health among women who are broadly representative of the entire Australian population. The study assesses:

- Physical and emotional health (including well-being, major diagnoses, symptoms)
- Use of health services (GP, specialist and other visits, access, satisfaction)
- Health behaviours and risk factors (diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol, other drugs)
- Time use (including paid and unpaid work, family roles, and leisure),
- Socio-demographic factors (location, education, employment, family composition)
- Life stages and key events (such as childbirth, divorce, widowhood).

The study provides a valuable opportunity to examine associations over time between aspects of women’s lives and their physical and emotional health. It provides an evidence base to the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, as well as other Commonwealth and State Departments, for the development and evaluation of policy and practice in many areas of service delivery that affect women.

An overview of the study and investigators, copies of the survey booklets, and abstracts of all publications and presentations can be located on the study’s website, www.alswh.org.au.

The study initially recruited over 40,000 Australian women and has been able to retain a very high proportion of the original participants. Among the Younger women, 72% responded to Survey 2 in 2000, a retention rate which compares well with other surveys of this highly mobile age group. Retention rates have been much higher among the Mid-age women; 92% and 85% of Mid-age women respectively responded to Survey 2 in 1998 and Survey 3 in 2001. Of the Older women, 91% responded to Survey 2 in 1999 and 83% to Survey 3 in 2002.