



Engaging Men

Men's use of healthcare services

In general, men visit the doctor less often than women have shorter consultations and tend to present later in the course of illness.

Men's health-seeking behaviour should not be misinterpreted as reflecting a lack of men's interest in their own health, or avoidance of healthcare. Most Australian men (95%) consider their health important, but not as many of them engage often or regularly with primary healthcare services¹.

Men monitor their own health, and they pay attention to the onset and progression of symptoms of disease. Their decisions to seek help depend on the nature of their illness, its impact on their lives, the duration of their symptoms and their previous experiences with health care services².

If a man has an illness that he assesses as being serious, which is painful or disfiguring, that prevents him from his usual activities, or for which he thinks treatment will be effective, he is more likely to seek help than for illnesses without any these characteristics.

Where men get health information

The most common sources of health information used by men are family members, the internet or a healthcare professional¹. Younger men prefer to use the internet, and older men more often choose a doctor or nurse as their first source of health information¹.

Men are critical users of health information, preferring reputable sources that are known or recommended to them. They may use online sources of health information to prepare for a visit to the doctor, but generally they do not see the internet as a replacement for a visit to a doctor³.

Community-based organisations, such as Men's Sheds, are a common and effective means of providing health information for many men⁴.

What men value from healthcare professionals

"Men prefer collaborative interventions involving action-oriented problem solving"⁵.

When men seek care, they want a prompt resolution of their problem by cooperating with a clearly competent and empathetic health practitioner, who takes a direct approach to the problem and might use humour to lighten the mood⁶.

Men who have a regular GP are more likely than men without one, to attend routine check-ups and disclose health information to their doctor.

A good relationship with their GP can motivate men to make an appointment to see them, to attend for regular check-ups, and to follow through with treatment and screening tests.

Men appreciate having a doctor who knows their medical history, so that they don't need to revisit it each time they visit³.

What men need from health service providers⁷

Barriers to men's access to healthcare services may be structural (e.g. lack of services) or systemic (e.g. poor communication between men and healthcare professionals).

Structural changes to health services, that create male-friendly settings, cater for the time constraints of many men, and integrate telehealth and other new technologies can improve men's access to healthcare.

Systemic changes that improve practitioners' ability to relate to male patients, and their knowledge of men's health, will likely increase men's use of healthcare services.

Men's willingness to seek healthcare is influenced by past experiences, so enabling positive interactions will facilitate greater use of healthcare services.

The health literacy and information needs of men are varied, so tailored approaches to provision of health information are required to ensure men are adequately informed about what is required of them for disease prevention and resolution.

Men may be reluctant to raise sexual or mental health concerns with their doctor but they are generally welcoming of enquiries about these topics by their doctor, and are forthcoming in providing relevant information⁸.

Characteristics of primary care practices that cater well for men

- Located near to public transport.
- Parking available on-site.
- Gender neutral décor.
- Prominent provision of male-oriented reading material and patient information in waiting areas.
- Display of posters/photographs featuring men in non-stereotypical settings.
- Clear display of available services and practitioners' expertise.
- Clear display of cost of services, including cancellation fees (ideally with an option of bulk billing for patients in financial stress).
- Clear information about processes to make appointments.
- Promotion of the option to choose longer consultation times when making appointments.
- Encouragement of patients to phone prior to appointments, to check on possible delays in consultation times, or provision of a service to notify patients if such a delay occurs.
- Flexibility in appointment times (e.g. provision of early morning, evening or weekend appointments or 'drop-in' clinics).
- Efficient clinic operation (e.g. simple procedures, clear communication, avoidance of redundant processes).
- Provision of male-only clinics.
- Visibility of male staff, especially in reception and other roles with patient contact.
- Use of questionnaires and forms completed by patients for collection of 'sensitive' information.
- Provision of privacy and use of discretion.
- Support and encourage continuing education of staff about men's health and communicating with men.
- Provision of information about local community resources and support services.

Characteristics of practice staff that cater well for men

- Respectfully welcome patients.
- Display empathy and understanding.
- Demonstrate expertise, knowledge and interest in men's health and social issues.
- Have expertise in men's health.
- Use patient-centred communication.
- Use non-deficit approaches to discussing health and wellbeing.
- Thoughtfully use humour.
- Make eye contact.
- Use direct communication.
- Avoid use of jargon and unnecessarily complicated explanations.
- Provide precise and clear instruction, information about next steps and prognosis.
- Encourage health seeking behaviour.
- Use time efficiently but do not rush during patient interactions.
- Ask questions about sexual and mental health, and other potentially sensitive issues.
- Are aware of local community services and facilities to support men's health and wellbeing.

Men's adherence to stereotypical masculine traits, such as stoicism, self-reliance, strength and control can stigmatise, and thereby discourage, healthcare seeking⁹.

There is widespread recognition in Australia that traditional masculine stereotypes are both inaccurate and harmful. Freeing men from these restrictive stereotypes will likely be good for their health and wellbeing, and that of society more generally¹⁰.

Health services should avoid blaming men and making assumptions about their behaviour, and focus on solutions rather than problems.

References

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