Handout 2.2a: Selected biological factors related to selected health conditions for men and women

Anaemia
- Iron deficiency linked to loss of iron during menstruation and pregnancy contributes to higher anaemia among women.
- Haemophilia is more common among men for genetic reasons.


Sexually transmitted infections (STI)
- STI are asymptomatic for longer periods among women. This may mean that STI are more likely to be diagnosed earlier among men due to the presence of physical symptoms.
- A man with a STI such as gonorrhoea is more likely to seek health care earlier because the symptoms (such as pain on urination) appear within a few days after infection.
- The non-specific and asymptomatic nature of the symptoms of STI in women often results in their seeking health care late, which can increase complications.
- A painless syphilitic ulcer on the genitalia of a man is more likely to be noticed than a similar ulcer on the female genitalia. This may influence health-seeking behaviour.
- See also HIV example below for further biological factors related to STI.


Osteoporosis
- Osteoporosis is three times more common among women than among men: partly because women have a lower peak bone mass and partly because of the hormonal changes that occur at menopause and the effect of pregnancy, which can alter the calcium composition in a woman’s body in the absence of appropriate diet and/or calcium supplements.
- Lifestyle factors such as diet, amount of sun exposure (influencing vitamin D levels) and degree of weight-bearing exercise (which reinforces bone strength) may also contribute to a higher prevalence among women.


HIV
- Women are more vulnerable to infection transmitted through unprotected sex with men.
- Higher vulnerability for women relates to:
  - the larger mucous membrane exposed during intercourse;
  - the length of time infected semen can remain in the vaginal tract (or greater exposure to infectious fluids such as semen);
  - the changes that occur in the vaginal mucosa as a result of the reproductive cycle or age; and
  - increased friction during intercourse, which may lead to tearing of the vaginal mucosa.
