

# Research

## Health challenges of rural life

**W**hen Catherine Hollingsworth feels like catching up with a friend, she needs to plan ahead. Catherine and her husband, Alastair, run Moonaree Station, a 2460-square kilometre property in South Australia's Gawler Ranges. The couple runs the station with only one permanent worker to help them tend their 22,000 sheep.

Catherine's closest friend lives four hours away in Port Augusta and Adelaide is a seven and a half hour drive away. "We don't have any mobile phone coverage and rely on satellite for the internet," says Catherine. "There aren't any towns or pubs and we get no deliveries. Running out of milk here is a whole new ball game compared to the city."

Where you live can have a direct effect on your health and wellbeing. Living in the city can be great as there are better employment and social opportunities but it can be stressful due to its hectic pace. Rural life also has its own set of challenges. According to an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) study, 'Health outside major cities', there are many long-term health conditions that are more common outside of major cities. The study also showed there are a number

of lifestyle considerations and risk factors that place people in regional areas at greater risk of death or injury. Working in physically demanding jobs like agriculture or mining may explain why 30% of non-city dwellers were likely to have a long-term health condition as a result of an injury. While

heart disease is the biggest killer for all Australians, non city-dwellers are 70% more likely to die from heart failure and 31% more likely to die from a stroke.

The extensive Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH) shows with increasing distance from major cities there is a decrease in women seeing medical specialists. Dentistry is a prime example, with city-based women visiting their dentist 50% more than rural women. The rates for breast screening and Pap smears are pretty similar for both groups

of women, but women living rurally were least happy about their level of access to these services.

Dr Deidre Bentley is a Jean Hailes GP specialising in

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women's health who sees these issues first-hand across rural Victoria. "Women living in rural communities have a range

of healthcare disadvantages compared to women in urban or inner regional areas," says Dr Bentley. "They may have difficulty accessing specialist services, often needing to travel longer distances, wait for longer periods or not be able to see a GP they know."

Then there is also the problem of privacy in a small town, especially surrounding sexual health, domestic violence or pregnancy. "If a woman knows her GP or his or her receptionist socially, she may be reluctant to discuss these issues, meaning

### FREE ONLINE RESOURCES

Depression, anxiety	<a href="http://beyondblue.org.au">beyondblue.org.au</a>
Multilingual resources	<a href="http://jeanhailes.org.au/health-professionals">jeanhailes.org.au/health-professionals</a>
Online mental health	<a href="http://ehub.anu.edu.au/welcome.php">ehub.anu.edu.au/welcome.php</a>
New parents	<a href="http://jeanhailes.org.au/what-were-we-thinking">jeanhailes.org.au/what-were-we-thinking</a>
Pain management	<a href="http://painaustralia.org.au">painaustralia.org.au</a>

## PEOPLE LIVING OUTSIDE MAJOR CITIES WERE:

- 23% more likely to have back pain
- 20% more likely to have had asthma
- 27% more likely to be deaf
- 16% more likely to report having a mental or behavioural problem
- 13% more likely to have arthritis
- 15% more likely to have high blood pressure
- 30% more likely to be smoking on a daily basis
- 32% more likely to engage in long-term risky drinking behaviour
- 13% more likely to be overweight or obese
- 55% more likely to meet the guidelines for recommended fruit and vegetable consumption

No significant differences in risk were found for cancer, diabetes, high cholesterol, osteoporosis, ischaemic heart disease

Figures from the ABS



Women living in the country feel more connected to their community

conditions may go undiagnosed or untreated until they become serious or require hospitalisation,” says Dr Bentley.

Technology is key for accessing healthcare rurally, but only a quarter of the Australian land mass has access to a mobile phone signal. Satellite phones fill the gap.

Australia’s Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) provides a unique service to remote stations, called the Flying Doctor Box. These medicine chests contain a wide range of prescription medicines, which are clearly numbered. Should someone fall ill, the RFDS can give life-saving instructions over the phone on how to use the medications.

### Life saving technology

During the busy shearing season, up to 20 contractors might work on Catherine’s station. And with them comes various ailments. The RFDS service was invaluable a few years ago, Catherine says, when one of their workers came out in a rash all over his body. “I was able to speak to a GP on the phone, email him a photograph and he identified it as a virus. The GP was able to guide me to the right medication and tell me how to administer it.”

Being so far from civilisation can be pretty stressful if something goes wrong, but Catherine thinks she’s lucky, being able to get into Adelaide every month, where she has her pick of doctors and plenty of chances to socialise.

The picture is not all negative for those living the rural life. Middle aged women who live outside major cities fare better across a number of mental health indicators, according to the ALSWH study. This group of women report feeling safer, more connected and attached to their community compared to women who live in major cities. This may be due to informal community support networks and the fact that rurally-located people tend to look out for each other. The study points towards older rural women having greater psychological resilience and an ability to draw upon strong community attachments as they age.

“I love living out here, it’s truly beautiful,” says Catherine. “There’s never a problem getting to sleep at night because of noisy neighbours or traffic, it’s incredibly peaceful.”