



Women with Developmental Disabilities Face Numerous Health Challenges

What is this research about?

Women with developmental disabilities have poorer medical and psychiatric outcomes than women without developmental disabilities. This research explores challenges faced by women with developmental disabilities within three main areas of women's health. First, it explores reproductive health. Historically, women with developmental disabilities had few opportunities to become pregnant and this is no longer the case. Next, researchers try to understand why many women with developmental disabilities are not getting screened for cervical and breast cancer. Finally, antipsychotic drugs are sometimes used off-label to address challenging behaviours in men and women with developmental disabilities. Research has shown that in the general population, women who use such medications are at greater risk of developing side effects than men—but what about women with developmental disabilities?

What did the researchers do?

In three projects under the umbrella of women's health, the Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) program examined the following questions, using administrative data held at the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES):

- What are the fertility rates, pregnancy care and outcomes of women with developmental disabilities compared to women without developmental disabilities?
- Are women with developmental disabilities who see their family physician regularly more likely to get breast and cervical cancer screening?
- Are women with developmental disabilities at a higher risk of experiencing side effects from antipsychotic medications compared to men with developmental disabilities?

What you need to know

This research highlights the importance of using a gender lens when addressing the health and health care of individuals with developmental disabilities. The voices of women with developmental disabilities need to be reflected in Ontario's women's health agenda.

What did the researchers find?

Reproductive health

Between 2002 and 2011, the researchers identified almost 4,000 deliveries for women with developmental disabilities in Ontario. Overall rates of pregnancy in women with developmental disabilities are 50% lower than the general population, but rates are similar for young women with and without developmental disabilities. Notably, women with developmental disabilities are at a higher risk for pregnancy-related medical problems and their babies are more likely to be born early and be smaller than they should be.

Breast and cervical cancer screening

The researchers found that of 5,420 eligible women with developmental disabilities, nearly half were not screened for breast cancer. Of 20,040 eligible for cervical cancer screening, two thirds were not screened. Other research has demonstrated that, in the general population, women who see their family doctor on a regular basis typically get screened for these two cancers. When it comes to women with developmental disabilities, this factor does not increase the uptake of screening.

Antipsychotic drug side effects

In the researchers' sample of men and women who were newly prescribed antipsychotic medication, women were more likely to develop blood clots, but there was no difference between women and men when it comes to developing diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attack, or stroke.

How can you use this research?

This research has implications for care providers who support women with developmental disabilities and their complex health care needs. For example, side effects need to be considered when antipsychotics are prescribed, especially if non-drug options are available. Perinatal health care needs to be better monitored, and finally, primary care providers should understand their role in improving the uptake of breast and cervical cancer screening.

About the researchers

Simone Vigod, MD, MSc, FRCPC, simone.vigod@wchospital.ca

Shirley Brown Clinician Scientist in Women's Mental Health, Women's College Research Institute

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto

Adjunct Scientist, Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences, Toronto, Ontario

Virginie Cobigo, PhD, C.Psych., virginie.cobigo@uottawa.ca

Associate Professor, School of Psychology & Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services, University of Ottawa

Adjunct Scientist, ICES uOttawa, Ottawa, Ontario

Hilary Brown, PhD, Women's College Hospital

Natasha Plourde, B.Sc. (Hons.), University of Ottawa

Keywords

Developmental disabilities, women, antipsychotic side effects, fertility, breast and cervical cancer

Do you want to know more/additional resources?

You can find more information about this research and see other women's health snapshots at www.hcardd.ca on the women's health project [page](#).

Read a [summary](#) of the women's health virtual Town Hall. View the virtual Town Hall [here](#).

Read a newsletter for caregivers entitled "[Not Skirting the Issue: Discovering Ways to End Poor Health Care for Women with Developmental Disabilities](#)"

About H-CARDD

Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) is a research program with the primary goal of enhancing the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services. H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, and health care providers.

We gratefully acknowledge the Province of Ontario for their support of this project through their research grants program. The opinions, results and conclusions in this summary are those of the authors and do not reflect that of the Province or the data providers. No endorsement by the Province or the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES) is intended or should be inferred. Parts of this material are based on data and information compiled and provided by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI). However, the analyses, conclusions, opinions and statements expressed herein are those of the author, and not necessarily those of CIHI.



Health Care Access Research
and Developmental Disabilities

www.hcardd.ca