

Talking about health and experiences of using health services with people from refugee backgrounds

Summary of findings from a state-wide consultation



victorian refugee
health network

115 consultations were conducted with people from refugee backgrounds, including people seeking asylum, in Victoria in March and April 2016. The consultations asked people about their health and experiences of using health services. The findings will inform the work of the Victorian Refugee Health Network and will be shared with Victorian services and government departments.

Key findings:

Healthy eating and food security

- Cost is a barrier to eating well – unhealthy food is cheaper
- Lack of traditional foods makes people unhealthy
- People need more information about the nutritional value of different foods to make choices about healthy eating
- Women identified not knowing how to cook with new and unfamiliar ingredients in Australia
- Obesity was identified as a problem for some communities



Social connectedness

- Many people said that social isolation, loneliness, and separation from family members and friends makes them unhealthy
- People said they lack opportunities to socialise, due to limited access to transport, language barriers and lack of connections with the broader Australian community
- Social connections are sources of health advice and support for people to access health services
- Older people especially rely on family members and community support to access health services

Physical exercise and sport

- People said they need more opportunities for physical exercise and participation in sporting activities
- Cost, lack of culturally appropriate sporting facilities, and lack of female-only facilities, are barriers to participation
- People said their lifestyles are more sedentary in Australia than they were in their home countries
- Sport was especially important for young people
- Parents said they lack opportunities to exercise



Health information and knowledge about health service systems

- People said they need better access to health education and information about health services
- People want health education on topics such as healthy eating, oral health, sexual health, preventative health, menopause, and cancer screening
- Limited knowledge about the Australian health system makes it hard for people to access health care
- Health information should be provided via translated brochures, information sessions to community groups, orientation sessions at services, and community media

Communication with health providers

- Many people said they are not offered an interpreter when they go to health services
- Limited English and not being provided with an interpreter make it hard for people to go to health services
- Seeing a GP who speaks their language makes some people feel more comfortable and trusting of the doctor
- Adults and older people had a stronger preference for bilingual GPs than young people



Accessibility and appropriateness of services

- Language barriers, distance to the service, long waiting times, cost, lack of transport options, difficulty making appointments and filling in forms make it hard for people to go to health services
- Caring responsibilities, no childcare, low confidence, and inability to see or request a female health practitioner make it hard for women to go to health services
- Men were more likely to say they do not seek help for their health problems
- Convenient location of the service close to where they live, public transport, co-location of different services in the one place, bilingual GPs, bicultural workers, community guides, drop-in clinics where no appointment is needed, GP or caseworker referral make it easy for people to go to health services

Mental health

- Many people said they were stressed, worried, had trouble sleeping, and had thoughts about the past
- People's mental wellbeing is affected by social isolation, separation from and worry about friends and family, worry about visa processing, uncertainty about the future, and having nothing to do
- People seeking asylum were especially stressed and worried, linked to their uncertain visa status
- Stigma, taboos, and denial make it hard for people to go to mental health services

Income and employment

- People said they need a good income and a job to be healthy
- Not having enough income makes it hard to buy healthy food, go to health services, access sport and exercise opportunities, and causes financial stress and worry
- Some people said they would like volunteering opportunities
- People seeking asylum were especially concerned about income and employment



Advice for doctors and other health providers:



show cultural competence and cultural understanding

be friendly and welcoming

listen, be respectful

take time to develop trust

be patient and sensitive to people's difficult past experiences

maintain confidentiality