

## Ancient Greek Women and Medicine

Women in Ancient Greece, especially Athens, famously had very restricted lives and few freedoms. They lived according to a set of societal expectations, and what we know of their lives looked very different from the lives of men. In addition, their health and bodies were regarded differently than those of males. This research seeks to answer questions about the health and wellness of ancient Athenian women, within the framework of Ancient Athenian society and with some consideration of other regions of Ancient Greece for comparison. How were women expected to care for themselves and their health? What did women do when something went wrong with their health? We will examine both literary and material evidence relevant to these questions.

A thorough discussion of this topic necessitates a general discussion of women in the Ancient Greek worldview, and a question hovered throughout these conversations in antiquity of “whether women are of one substance with men or a separate creation” (Parker 2012, 107). A prime example of this is the myth of Pandora, in which woman is created separately from man out of mud. The female body, then, was regarded as being completely different from that of the male. As Robert Garland phrases the issue, “From Aristotle’s perspective, women were failed males” (Garland 1998, 110). As such, medical writers also viewed the female body as entirely different and had many theories about its internal workings. There is quite a range of theoretical discussion on female health and physiology in ancient literature.

Much of the discussion of women’s bodies in ancient Greek literature emphasizes their mature childbearing years, but different parts of the female lifespan carried different roles and issues relating to health. In their earliest years, girls were more frequently exposed as infants, and

generally did not have as many resources expended on them in their upbringing. This included having less of a quality diet than boys. We learn little about this phase of life from literary sources beyond that girls learned household skills like weaving from their mothers at home (Lee 2015, 43). The onset of menstruation, which was expected around the age of 14, reclassified a girl as a *parthenos*. This new role came with a greater set of societal expectations, and “the virginal female body was arguably the most socially regulated in ancient Greece” (Lee 2015, 45). Authors of medical texts especially display concern about *parthenoi* and their bodies.

When a *parthenos* transitioned into marriage and the production of children, she became a *gyne*. The ultimate goal for most women in Ancient Greece, as can be seen repeated throughout ancient literature, was to marry and have children. With this goal in mind, the female body was primarily expected to be prepared for one specific task— childbirth. Women’s bodies were, then, “strictly regulated” and “valued primarily for their reproductive capacities” (Lee 2015, 46). This emphasis on a woman's ability to bear children even affected their clothing, which was often intended to highlight areas of the body associated with fertility. The uterus and the women’s body as a whole were regarded “as a corporeal container” (Ielo 2014, 90). With this goal in mind for women, we can better understand ancient medical texts discussing women.

In regard to treatment of illness, women often allowed a condition to worsen instead of seeking help because “they were ashamed to reveal it to a male physician” (Ielo 2014, 87). When a woman did seek help from a physician, ancient literature relates a wide range of analyses and treatments of diseases relating to women and their health. In addition, women turned to Asclepius and other deities for help with ailments as a complement to Hippocratic medicine (King 1998, 103). Votive offerings represented different parts of the female body or represented childbirth. Women’s health and wellness largely emphasized the importance in Ancient Greek

society of their fertility. Further study of ancient evidence pertaining to women's health and wellness in Ancient Greece will aid in better understanding the roots of modern western medicine, in which women sometimes still struggle to obtain adequate understanding and treatment for ailments.

#### Works Cited

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