



## Overview

Today, because of innovation, research and development, and medical breakthroughs, women have shorter diagnostic journeys and more viable treatments than ever. Despite this progress, hurdles continue in normalizing conversation on women's health in the workplace, misdiagnosis of health issues, and achieving higher levels of health equity among minority populations. Lawmakers and experts are seeking solutions to align incentives, expand access, and foster an ecosystem that improves outcomes.

This Basic provides an overview of critical domains impacting women's well-being, including **maternal health**, **menopause**, oncology, **infertility** treatments such as **in vitro fertilization (IVF)**, and **emergency contraception**.

## Maternal Health

The United States is often cited for its poor maternal mortality rates. While it can be debated whether the country's global ranking truly reflects obstetrical factors or is rather a product of the way the United States counts maternal deaths, the U.S. currently ranks as one of the most challenged industrialized countries in the world for maternal health. Despite advancements in healthcare, **barriers to treatment** and preventative care persist, disproportionately affecting women of color, particularly in southern and rural areas. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals a stark reality: the United States grapples with a maternal mortality rate of 18.6 deaths per 100,000 births. Of profound concern is the finding that Black patients face a mortality rate 3.5 times higher than their white counterparts, underscoring racial inequities in this part of the healthcare system.

One of the most challenging subsets complicating maternal health is **postpartum depression** — a condition affecting approximately 1 in 7 mothers. The symptoms include depression, insomnia, fatigue, anxiety, and loss of energy, among others. **Risk factors** for the condition include a history of depression, a risky pregnancy, the mother's age, and chronic conditions. Barriers to treatment can include low awareness, mental health stigma, and a small window of assessment, diagnosis, and treatment compared to other conditions. Barriers to treatment can include stigma, lack of timely access to approved postpartum depression treatments and other supports, and a shorter timeframe for coverage of PPD diagnosis and treatment, compared to other conditions.

In 2025, the federal government continued its interest in maternal health. The full-year continuing resolution maintained funding for key maternal health programs at

## Center Forward Basics

Center Forward brings together members of Congress, not-for-profits, academic experts, trade associations, corporations and unions to find common ground. Our mission: to give centrist allies the information they need to craft common sense solutions, and provide those allies the support they need to turn those ideas into results.

In order to meet our challenges we need to put aside the partisan bickering that has gridlocked Washington and come together to find common sense solutions.

For more information, please visit [www.center-forward.org](http://www.center-forward.org)

## Key Definitions:

- **Maternal Health:** The health of a woman during pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal
- **Menopause:** A life stage, typically in a woman's late 40s or 50s, defined once 12 months have passed after the last menstrual cycle
- **Infertility:** The inability to achieve a successful pregnancy based on a patient's medical, sexual, reproductive history, age, physical findings, diagnostic testing, or any combination of those factors

the prior year's levels. In 2026, it remains unclear how Congress will set funding levels for critical programs supporting maternal health.

## Infertility/IVF

Infertility is a medical condition recognized by the American Medical Association and the World Health Organization (WHO), and defined as the inability to achieve a successful pregnancy based on a patient's medical, sexual, reproductive history, age, physical findings, diagnostic testing, or any combination of those factors. According to the WHO, infertility affects 1 in 6 people globally. Assisted reproductive technologies (ART), such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), offer hope to many, with approximately 100,000 babies born through IVF each year in the United States. IVF enables individuals who use fertility preservation services to save their eggs, sperm, or reproductive tissues to have children at a later time. However, access to infertility diagnosis and treatments, including IVF, remains limited. Only 47% of large employers offer coverage for IVF treatment.

Without preeminent federal legislation, access to diagnosis and treatment is left to the states, which vary widely. Twenty-five states, including the District of Columbia, have passed some form of fertility insurance coverage, and twenty-one cover fertility preservation for iatrogenic (medically induced) infertility. Fifteen of those have included IVF coverage.

## Oncology

Of the cancers for which screening is recommended, breast and cervical cancers pose formidable challenges to women's health, with disparities in screening rates exacerbating existing obstacles. In 2025, over 316,950 women were diagnosed with invasive breast cancer, and 13,360 were diagnosed with cervical cancer. Concerted efforts are needed to bridge the gap in awareness and access surrounding breast and cervical cancer screenings.

Lower cancer screening rates persist among uninsured and underinsured populations. To address low screening rates, the CDC's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP) was created to reduce disparities by providing critical screenings, diagnostic tests, and treatment referrals to limited-income, underserved, underinsured, and uninsured communities. The program has provided more than 15 million exams to more than 6 million eligible people.

Bipartisan legislative efforts have attempted to reauthorize the NBCCEDP through 2030, ensuring continued access to vital breast and cervical cancer screenings for limited-income and underinsured individuals. One such example is the [Screening for Communities to Receive Early and Equitable Needed Services \(SCREENS\) for Cancer Act](#).

## Menopause

Menopause is a natural biological transition marking the cessation of menstrual cycles, affecting an estimated 75 million women in the United States. Menopausal transition

- **In Vitro Fertilization:** A procedure in which a woman's eggs are removed from the ovary and combined with sperm outside the body to form embryos
- **Barriers to Treatment:** Events or characteristics that restrain or serve as obstacles to a person receiving healthcare. Examples can include location, misdiagnosis, language, stigma, etc.
- **Postpartum Depression:** A health condition occurring after childbirth. Symptoms include depression, insomnia, fatigue, etc.
- **Risk Factors:** A component increasing the chance of developing the disease. E.g. risk factors of cancer are age, family history, smoking, infection with certain viruses/bacteria, etc.
- **Perimenopause:** The transitional time when the body experiences a decline in reproductive hormones, resulting in the end of a woman's menstrual cycles
- **Hormone Therapy:** Medical treatment for menopausal symptoms involving replacing hormones the body's ovaries no longer produce

## Key Statistics:

- The average age of menopause is 51 in industrialized countries
- Only 33.3% of women say they are aware of the menopause-related benefits they are offered
- Only 14% of employees say

has three phases: (1) **perimenopause**: the time when the body experiences a natural decline in reproductive hormones resulting in the end of a woman's menstrual cycle; (2) Menopause: the point when a woman has gone twelve months without a period. Most women experience this between 40 and 58, and (3) Postmenopause: The time of life after menopause.

Symptoms of menopause can include, but are not limited to, inconsistent menstrual cycles, hot flashes, trouble sleeping, joint pain, decreased focus, decreased mental health, and more. Some symptoms, such as hot flashes, can persist for an average of 8.8 years. The U.S. economy hemorrhages an estimated \$26.6 billion annually due to productivity losses and healthcare expenditures as a result of menopause.

Women navigating menopause encounter myriad challenges in the workplace. Twenty percent of the workforce is in some phase of the menopause transition, fifty percent of whom have reported symptoms negatively impacting their work life, and twenty-five percent considered not pursuing, or did not pursue, leadership positions because of symptoms. When polled, female employees feel there should be greater awareness, education, and employer benefits related to menopause. Eighty-one percent say there is a need for better education on menopause before, during, and after its onset. Another sixty percent believe menopause is generally stigmatized. Accessing menopause professionals can be challenging due to limited provider education. The workplace benefits female employees have reported valuing are a written menopause policy, **hormone replacement therapy**, nonhormonal treatment options covered by health insurance, and access to menopause professionals.

## Emergency Contraception

Around 43% of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended, highlighting a major public health need, with emergency contraception pills (ECP) providing a vital "second chance" for those with inconsistent regular contraception, unprotected sex, or after sexual assault. There are two different types of ECP that are available in the U.S.: Over-the-counter pills (like Plan B) that contain levonorgestrel, which is the same active ingredient used in regular birth control (just at a single, higher dose), or a prescription pill containing ulipristal acetate (ella®).

Both ECP options work better the sooner they are taken after unprotected sex or birth control failure. Over-the-counter ECP options must be used within 72-hours, while prescription ulipristal acetate must be used within 120-hours to help prevent pregnancy. Over-the-counter emergency contraception works before the release of an egg from the ovary by temporarily delaying ovulation. It does not impact the implantation of a fertilized egg or harm an existing pregnancy, and is available in all 50 U.S. states without a prescription, ID, or age restriction for purchase.

## Looking Ahead

In conclusion, women's health is shaped by economic, social, cultural, and systemic factors. By acknowledging and addressing disparities, lawmakers, healthcare providers and systems, employers, and communities can foster a future where every woman has equitable access to care and support.

their employees recognize the need for menopause-related benefits

- 80% of OB-GYN residents admitted to being ill-prepared to discuss menopause
- Women's health receives less than 1% of the venture capital investment in biopharma
- Twice as many women have Alzheimer's compared to men
- IVF accounts for over 99% of assisted reproductive technology (ART) procedures
- The average IVF cycle costs between \$15,000 and \$30,000
- The average number of IVF cycles to become pregnant is 2.5
- California, New York, and Texas are the states with the most IVF births

## Links to Other Resources

- Alzheimer's Society: [Why is Dementia Different for Women?](#)
- American Addiction Centers: [Barriers to Addiction Treatment](#)
- American Cancer Society: [Cancer Facts and Figures 2024](#)
- American Cancer Society: [Cancer Prevention and Early Detection Facts and Figures](#)
- American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology: [Maternal Mortality in the U.S. - How It Is Counted](#)
- BIO News: [Bio's Women's Health Task Force](#)
- Black Maternal Health Caucus: [Maternal Health Priorities Included in FY24 Bipartisan Appropriations Law](#)
- Blue Cross Blue Shield: [Improving Health Equity in Maternal Care](#)
- Blue Cross Blue Shield: [Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Maternal Health](#)
- Blue Cross Blue Shield: [Improving Postpartum Maternal Health Outcomes](#)
- Blue Cross Blue Shield: [Creating a More Equitable System for the Health of America](#)
- Cancer Causes and Control: [The eligibility and reach of the national breast and cervical cancer early detection program after implementation of the Affordable Care Act](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [Assisted Reproductive Therapy](#)
- Congressional Research Service: [Poverty Among the Population Aged 65 and Older](#)
- Contemporary OB-GYN: [Menopause Curriculum Lacking in Residency Programs](#)
- Department of Education: [The effects of menopause transition on women's economic participation](#)
- Department of Health and Human Services: [In Vitro Fertilization Fact Sheet](#)
- GoodRx: [Helping Women Thrive Through Life Challenges](#)
- GoodRx: [Navigate Fertility with Confidence](#)
- GoodRx: [Prioritize Your Menopausal Health](#)
- IZA: [Hormone Replacement Therapy and Labor Market Behavior of Middle-Aged Women](#)
- Ipsos: [Many women report not feeling comfortable discussing menopause at work](#)
- KFF: [Emergency Contraception](#)
- Let's Talk Menopause: [Further Reading](#)
- Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance: [Fact Sheet Library](#)
- Mayo Clinic: [The Price Tag on Menopause](#)
- Mercer: [Family-friendly benefits take off](#)
- National Infertility Association: [Insurance Coverage by State](#)
- National Institute of Cancer: [Definition of In Vitro Fertilization](#)
- National Institute of Cancer: [Definition of Risk Factor](#)
- National Institute of Mental Health: [Perinatal Depression](#)
- National Institute of Health: [National Library of Medicine](#)
- National Library of Medicine: [Postpartum Depression Screening Needs More Consistency](#)
- Society for Women's Health Research: [Menopause Workplace Resource Guide for Women](#)

- Society for Women's Health Research: [EMPACT Menopause Study Bulletin](#)
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: [Women in the labor force](#)
- World Health Organization: [Maternal Health](#)