



Mass General Brigham
Health Plan



Inclusive perspectives

Pregnancy, postpartum, and menopausal care
that support diversity, equity, and inclusion
initiatives in the workforce

Introduction

Inclusion in the workplace is essential if you ask today's workforce. That's because inclusion helps foster a supportive community among employees that makes them feel valued. As a result, this can empower innovation, boost productivity, and lower turnover. A crucial component of inclusion is tending to employees' unique healthcare needs.



Your workforce is made up of a diverse set of individuals—many of whom experience or support people going through pregnancy and menopause. Although specialty care offerings in these areas have been excluded from healthcare benefits historically, today's employers are embracing solutions to support the full spectrum of health for their employees. When your organization has comprehensive solutions in place, it reinforces a commitment to both your workforce and your Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

In this eBook, you'll learn:

- The disparities that lead to poor outcomes in pregnancy and postpartum experiences
- Why incorporating inclusion principles into all company processes is key to addressing barriers to care
- The importance of menopause support in the workplace
- What programs Mass General Brigham Health Plan offers to support pregnancy, menopause, and mental healthcare

Table of contents

What is inclusivity?	3
The impact of inclusivity in pregnancy and postpartum experiences	4
Inclusive models of prenatal care	6
Mental health and emotional well-being during pregnancy and postpartum	7
The importance of menopause care	8
Our pregnancy and menopause health portfolio	10



Click on the section you want to read.



What is inclusivity?

Before delving into the specifics of how patients receive care, it's helpful to understand inclusivity within a broader context. Inclusive healthcare focuses on the idea that if we recognize barriers to healthcare access, offer accommodations based on patient needs, and provide informed and sensitive care, it's possible to improve health outcomes for all—no matter what health disparities or challenges might be present.



According to 2023 research in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, inclusive healthcare practice and service delivery covers aspects of diversity and intersectionality and includes strategies such as:

- Examining assumptions and stereotypes within health teams
- Using inclusive language and ensuring appropriate communication methods
- Expanding the scope of inclusive healthcare delivery
- Building individual and institutional commitments
- Acknowledging disparities and their potential role in healthcare delivery and outcomes

Those researchers noted that practices like these can improve patient-centered care, especially for those who are often overlooked in mainstream healthcare settings.

The impact of inclusivity in pregnancy and postpartum experiences

Using the framework on the previous page to examine maternal health, there are three main areas where more inclusive care is essential when it comes to patient outcomes: disparities that affect healthcare access, mental health considerations for diverse communities, and support of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Here's why inclusivity needs to be threaded through each of these more fully for better care:



Disparities in maternal health outcomes

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related causes than white women. The [Kaiser Family Foundation \(KFF\)](#) reports that social and economic factors, racism, and chronic stress contribute to poor maternal and infant health outcomes, including higher rates of preterm birth among Black women.

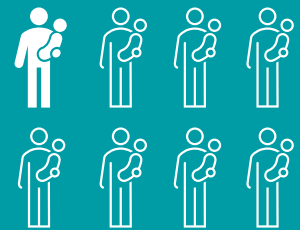
The foundation adds that stark racial disparities in maternal and infant health in the U.S. have persisted for decades despite continued advancements in medical care, leading to higher shares of preterm births, low birthweight births, and late or no prenatal care for Black, American Indian and Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander women.



Mental health considerations for diverse communities

The [KFF report](#) notes that diverse communities also experience higher rates of perinatal depression. Notably, while Black women are more likely to have postpartum depression, they are less likely to receive help.

This type of depression, both before and after delivery, can create bonding issues between a mother and her baby, the organization notes. It can also cause mental, emotional, developmental, and verbal complications in children. Accessing treatment that includes cultural understanding is critical for improving health outcomes for women and their babies.



[Postpartum depression \(PPD\) affects one in eight women; however, the risk is 1.6 times higher for Black women than White women.](#)



Supporting LGBTQ+ individuals in pregnancy and postpartum

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and those of other gender identities who are pregnant or want to become pregnant may face worse pregnancy outcomes than heterosexual patients, according to a 2022 commentary in [BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology](#). This includes significantly higher rates of both miscarriage and

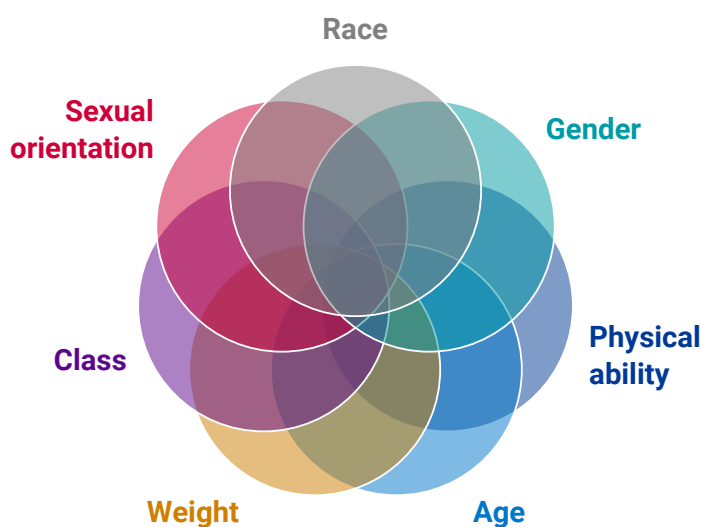
stillbirth compared to heterosexual cisgender individuals. Major contributors to this are disparities in gender-affirming care throughout pregnancy and less acknowledgment of risk factors unique to the LGBTQ+ population.

Despite evidence-based clinical recommendations that this type of care and understanding would lead to beneficial outcomes during pregnancy and the postpartum period, researchers noted that these patients still encounter many barriers to healthcare, including limited access to obstetric care and less awareness of pre-existing chronic medical condition, as well as higher risk for depression.

Lack of inclusivity practices is related to these issues, the CDC notes. That's why the agency urges healthcare providers to recognize and work to eliminate unconscious bias and acknowledge the benefit of inclusivity in treating pregnant and postpartum patients.

Everyone has unique experiences and factors that have to be considered when delivering care.

Intersectionality is complex, as it involves:



Any of these can combine to affect health outcomes, including reproductive care and fertility. Rather than focus on only one aspect of a person's identity, intersectionality embraces the layered complexity that comes with each individual, and acknowledges the role that multiple factors can play.

What's needed to support a diverse workforce is a plan for systemic inclusion that considers intersectionalities and comprehensively addresses all barriers. This is what embeds inclusion principles into all processes, from recruiting to talent development to benefit options.



Inclusive models of prenatal care

Recognizing that inclusivity can make a significant difference in reducing disparities and improving maternal health for your employees—the next step is looking at strategies that can turn that understanding into beneficial outcomes. So, let's start with prenatal care.

Emphasizing an inclusive model can be key in three main areas:

- 1 Midwifery care:** The [philosophy of care at the American College of Nurse-Midwives](#) states that midwives believe in the basic human rights of all persons, including equitable and accessible health care, acknowledgment of a person's life experiences, and care that respects human dignity, individuality, and diversity.



Did you know?

Midwives provide care during pregnancy and birth, and may attend births in hospitals, birth centers, or homes. [In 2021, midwives attended 12% of births in the U.S.](#)

Similarly, the [Midwives Alliance of North America](#) recently revised its [core competencies](#) to use more gender-inclusive language to reaffirm midwives' goal "to be more aware, sensitive, and humble to the needs of each family system and the devastating effects of marginalization." Having these types of foundational philosophies and practices can go a long way toward providing more inclusive prenatal care to members of your workforce.

- 2 Partner involvement and family-centered care:** Another factor that can reduce disparity and improve maternal health in the prenatal period is more involvement from a partner and family. That's why emphasizing these interactions as an employer supports inclusivity. For example, [research in the *International Journal of Community-Based Nursing and Midwifery*](#) found that a spouse's involvement in prenatal care has a significant effect in reducing the incidence of postpartum depression in your employees.



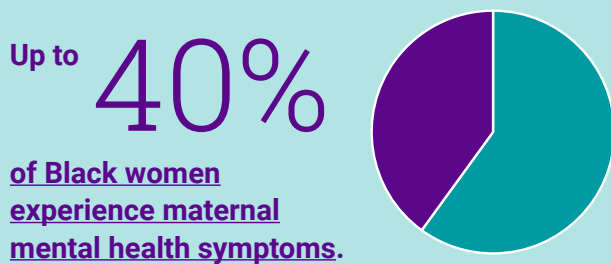
- 3 Innovative technologies for inclusivity in remote areas:** There are many factors that can contribute to health disparities, and one of them is location. If your employees are living in rural or remote areas, they may struggle with healthcare access and as a result, receive less care during the crucial prenatal months.

Technology can help alleviate or even eliminate this issue. Innovative technology provides virtual face-to-face appointments with a patient's healthcare provider—and allows for health monitoring such as blood pressure, blood glucose, heart rate, and other health markers.

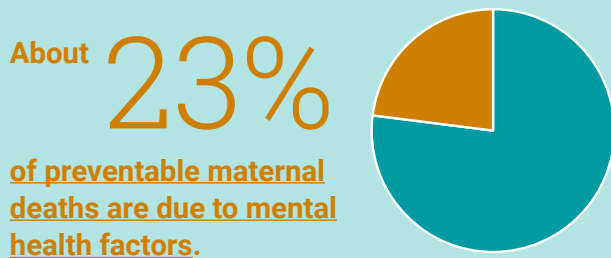
Mental health and emotional well-being during pregnancy and postpartum

As noted in the previous sections, mental health is a significant concern when it comes to maternal health, both during pregnancy and afterward.

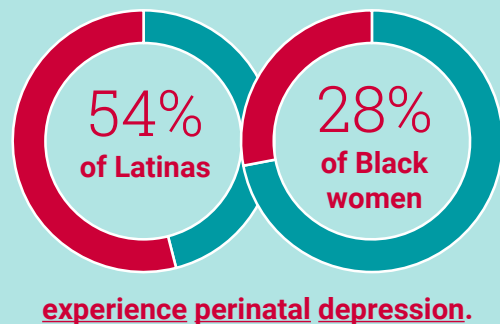
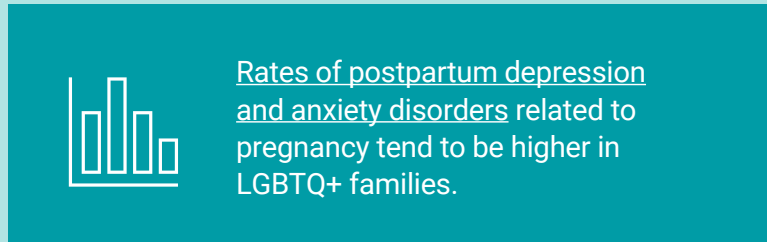
Addressing perinatal and postpartum mood disorder in all communities is an incredibly vital part of inclusive care, especially because mental health issues may be more pronounced within certain groups:



This is nearly twice the rate of all women; about half of Black women do not receive any support or treatment.



Mental health conditions, including substance use disorder, were the leading cause of maternal death for Hispanic women.



While depression and anxiety are common during pregnancy in general, these are experienced at higher rates among women who are racial and ethnic minorities.



Addressing employees' loss

Research in *Frontiers in Public Health* notes that a multi-disciplinary, family-oriented approach should be implemented to address intense grief resulting from miscarriage, IVF loss, stillbirth, and infant loss, especially since these losses can lead to depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress.

During all parts of a maternal journey, inclusive healthcare focuses on building resilience and offering coping strategies. Support can make a difference in helping all members of a family feel heard, seen, and understood.



The importance of menopause care

Inclusive care isn't just for pregnancy and postpartum support, it's also essential for helping those who are navigating perimenopause and menopause. That's because this part of life can bring considerable mental and physical changes.

According to the North American Menopause Society (NAMS), the most common symptoms include:



Hot flashes that involve a sudden wave of warmth, accompanied by sweating and a rapid heartbeat.



Changes in sexual desire, particularly if sleep disturbance or mood changes are significant.



Night sweats, which are hot flashes while sleeping that can cause sleep disruption and may lead to mood changes overall.



Trouble concentrating or a feeling of "brain fog" that makes it difficult to focus.



Vaginal atrophy, the drying and thinning of vaginal tissues that may lead to pain during sex along with burning and soreness.



Feeling irritable, tearful, moody, frustrated, or experiencing other mental health changes that can be intense. Depression risk increases during menopause since hormonal shifts, stress, and family history of the condition can combine during this time.

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Most individuals experience menopause between ages 40 and 58, and the average age is 51, [NAMS reports](#). However, physical changes can begin years before the final menstrual period. This transition phase, called perimenopause, may last for four to eight years, and because a person may still be menstruating, they may not connect symptoms like the ones on the previous page with their body and mind preparing them for menopause.

Also, despite more widespread discussion of the effects of menopause in general, there's still a lack of education and understanding about this important stage of a woman's life, according to [research in the journal *Women's Health*](#). A survey of attitudes around menopause found that more than 90 percent of those surveyed had never been taught about menopause at school, and more than 60 percent did not feel at all informed about menopause. In all, 68 percent of women only learned about menopause when their symptoms began and they started searching online for answers.

That indicates a deep need for better support when it comes to all aspects of menopause, including the mental, physical, and emotional effects that can occur. Having access to experts—not just doing a web search on symptoms—and connecting with others who are also navigating through this experience are crucial for better health outcomes because those are key elements for reducing stress. Not only does that provide better emotional wellbeing, but it may even reduce symptoms.



[According to research in *PLoS One*](#), it was found that when women have social support, it lessens the most disruptive effects of menopause, such as hot flashes.



As mentioned, addressing intersectionality necessitates an approach to inclusive care that acknowledges different aspects of an individual, particularly respectful communication. The [CDC's Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication](#) calls for confronting the systems and policies that have given rise to health inequities, and emphasizes the importance of addressing all people inclusively and respectfully. That means adapting communication and messaging to the specific cultural, linguistic, environmental, and historical situation of each population or individual.

Our pregnancy and menopause health portfolio

Inclusivity is an opportunity for employers to contribute directly to employee satisfaction and, therefore, productivity, retention, and talent acquisition. When inclusive care needs are prioritized and understood throughout the culture of an organization, team members gain a better understanding of how to create welcoming, safe spaces that feel accessible and supportive while centered around employees' needs.



Although it's crucial to keep having conversations about the challenges and opportunities around inclusivity and intersectionality, it's even more essential to take action in a way that encompasses all these perspectives. This can be through comprehensive health benefits, value-added programs like EAP offerings, and DEI policies.

Creating meaningful action is why the portfolio at Mass General Brigham Health Plan has been built from the ground up with inclusivity as its foundation. This encompasses offerings such as:



Poppy Seed Health

This 24/7, on-demand emotional and mental healthcare company provides support to people on their reproductive health journey through pregnancy, postpartum, or loss. Through Poppy Seed Health, you can access on-demand text support from a trained professional. You can also join advocate-led support groups, movement workshops, and self-expression sessions.*



Elektra Health

This virtual platform helps individuals navigate every stage of menopause and hormonal health concerns. The platform also includes educational programs, a dedicated menopause guide, and a community of others who are going through menopause. Mass General Brigham Health Plan is proud to partner with Elektra as one of the only plans in the nation to offer menopause support.*



Lyra Health

Many of our members can access mental health care quickly with Lyra Health's easy-to-use digital platform. It offers a range of virtual and in-person options, including self-service tools, mental health coaching, therapy, and medication management. With user-friendly provider matching, members can quickly schedule appointments, often within one to three days.

**Mass General Brigham Health Plan offers annual subscriptions to Poppy Seed Health and Elektra Health, through commercial fully insured individual or employer sponsored health plans.*

Our commitment to equity and inclusion

According to the U.S. News and World Report, Mass General Brigham has five nationally ranked hospitals, and of those, Brigham and Women's Hospital was ranked first nationwide for Obstetrics and Gynecology for the second year in a row. "We are proud that our system is home to five nationally ranked hospitals, including two Honor Roll-awarded academic medical centers and three of the nation's leading specialty hospitals along with top national honors for women's health and psychiatry," said Anne Klibanski, President and CEO of Mass General Brigham.



Mass General Brigham Health Plan remains committed to inclusivity and addressing the biases that still exist around maternal and menopausal healthcare. As a health system, we aim to help overcome those inequities through inclusive care. We are offering innovative programs that meet today's members wherever they are at different stages of life to break down barriers and connect them to critical resources and community support.

— Lindsay Jubelt, MD, MS, Chief Population Health Officer, Mass General Brigham, and Chief Medical Officer of Mass General Brigham Health Plan



With these services, as well as care throughout the Mass General Brigham system, we're committed not just to maintaining our nationally ranked status, but also to recognizing, supporting, and appreciating every patient, at every appointment, every time.



To learn more about pregnancy and menopause support at Mass General Brigham Health Plan, visit MassGeneralBrighamHealthPlan.org/pregnancy-menopause

If you'd like to learn more about Mass General Brigham Health Plan, reach out to your broker or benefits advisor or follow us on social media [@MGBHealthPlan](https://twitter.com/MGBHealthPlan)



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Mass General Brigham Health Plan includes Mass General Brigham Health Plan, Inc. and Mass General Brigham Health Insurance Company.