

This fact sheet provides an overview of the public health issue of access to preventive healthcare services for women with disabilities and some of the major barriers that women with disabilities face when accessing preventive healthcare. It also provides solutions that state public health agencies can consider to eliminate these barriers.

Overview

Access to preventive healthcare services for women with disabilities is an emerging public health priority. A person with a disability is someone who has limited hearing, vision, mobility, cognition, or emotional or behavioral disorders.¹

- Approximately one in five women has a disability in the United States.²
- Disability affects women more significantly as they age. More than 50 percent of women older than age 65 live with a disability.³
- The most common causes of disability among women are arthritis, back pain, and heart trouble.⁴
- Women with disabilities are more likely to use the healthcare system, but report greater dissatisfaction with the care they receive.⁵
- Women with disabilities experience poorer health than women who do not have disabilities.⁶

Disability itself is not an illness, and people living with disabling conditions can be healthy despite the disease or disorder causing the impairment. Being healthy includes having the knowledge and tools to promote wellness and prevent illness.¹

Barriers to Accessing Healthcare Services

Women with disabilities face several widespread barriers when accessing preventive healthcare services, which affects their overall health and the quality of care they receive. Due to these barriers, women with disabilities are at greater risk for developing preventable health conditions and comorbid chronic diseases such as hypertension, osteoporosis, diabetes, obesity, and heart disease than women without disabilities.^{7 8} Barriers can include physical and structural obstacles, communication and provider bias, and financial and systemic barriers.

Physical and Structural Obstacles

Despite being at higher risk for developing certain chronic and secondary conditions, women with disabilities are less likely to report receiving preventive care screenings due to the inaccessibility of healthcare facilities and medical equipment. Inability to access medical equipment may lead to delayed diagnosis or treatment of breast cancer and other reproductive health concerns. Fewer women with disabilities report mammography use and Pap tests than women without disabilities.^{1,9} The most commonly cited reason women with disabilities did not receive a mammogram or Pap test in the last two years was the inability to get into the required position or onto the examination table.¹⁰

Communication and Provider Bias

The healthcare workforce is often not trained to treat women with disabilities. Providers may only focus on the woman's disabling condition and not on other disease signs and symptoms due to assumptions about a woman's disability.¹¹ Women with disabilities may not be screened for sexually transmitted diseases, receive regular gynecological exams, or be advised about preconception health and healthy pregnancies due to a provider's assumption that they are not sexually active.¹¹ Barriers can also exist for

women with vision, hearing, reading, language, or other impairments when they receive health information that is not in an accessible format (e.g., braille, large print, audio tape, e-text).¹¹

Financial and Systemic Barriers

Obtaining affordable, coordinated, and accessible healthcare services is a significant challenge for women with disabilities. Compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are less likely to have private health insurance due to the effects of unemployment, poverty, and single marital status.¹² Studies show that some healthcare providers have refused to treat patients who do not have private insurance.¹³ Provider facilities are often inaccessible and do not comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. Nearly one-third of women with a physical disability reported being denied service from a medical provider solely because of their disability.¹³ For many women with disabilities, coordinating transportation for medical appointments and home care services is another barrier to seeking healthcare.¹⁰ Nearly two-thirds of women with functional limitations who live in the community rely on family, friends, and volunteers for personal assistance services.¹³

Public Health Solutions

State public health agencies have an important role in ensuring access to affordable, high-quality healthcare services for women with disabilities. Strategies states may consider to reduce barriers for women with disabilities include:

- ✓ Working with healthcare facilities to design or update buildings so they comply with ADA.¹³
- ✓ Working with providers to ensure that staff are adequately trained in disability issues and fully aware of Affordable Care Act requirements.¹⁴
- ✓ Working with providers to ensure accessible medical equipment is available and that staff are adequately trained to provide preventive and curative care services to women with disabilities.
- ✓ Providing patient follow up information and health promotion materials in accessible formats.
- ✓ Including women with disabilities in the planning, reporting, and evaluation of topics like medical reimbursement, health service delivery, community planning, communication, and transportation.
- ✓ Tailoring health promotion and other outreach messages and programs to women with disabilities.
- ✓ Educating women with disabilities and healthcare providers about the importance of preventive health services and screenings.
- ✓ Encouraging healthcare providers to advocate for their patients' needs and to use all available resources in the best interest of the patient.
- ✓ Giving providers information to help them advocate for their patients with disabilities and information about the available resources to help treat a patient.
- ✓ Strengthening partnerships with other state agencies, including mental health, social services, Medicaid, and transportation to coordinate efforts to increase services for women with disabilities.
- ✓ Working with other agencies to ensure an integrated system of accessible, coordinated, comprehensive, and linguistically and culturally competent care for women with disabilities.



Access to Preventive Healthcare Services for Women with Disabilities

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