

The Stakes for Women of Childbearing Age in Today's Health Reform Debate

Women have major influence on the health decisions for themselves and the rest of their family – from decisions about use of preventive services to nutrition to long-term care. One important factor in women's health is reproductive health, particularly for those who want to have children.

More than 4.3 million babies were born in 2007 – a U.S. record. The average woman had two children. While most women have health coverage and access to care during pregnancy, millions of women do not receive the health care they needed to stay healthy throughout their childbearing years.

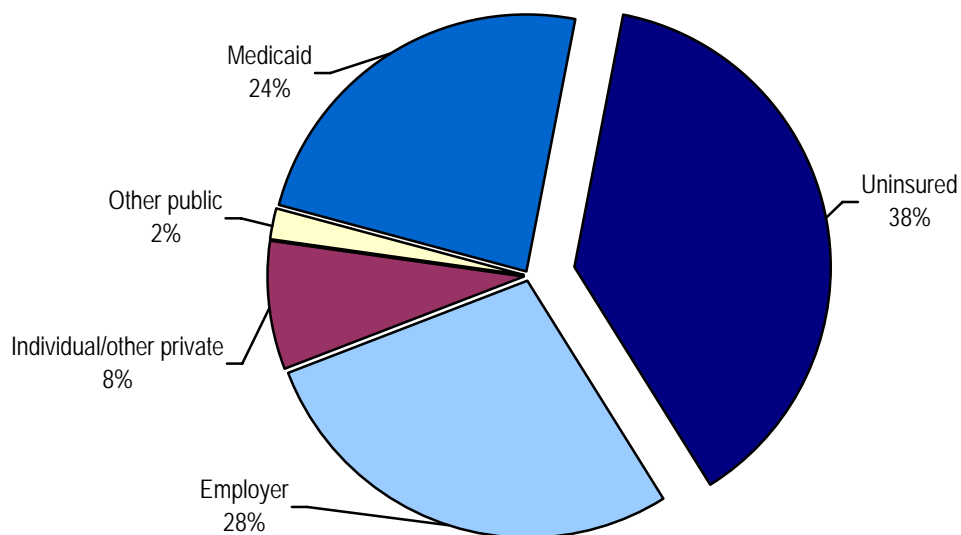
Experts have identified evidence-based interventions that can be delivered *before* a woman becomes pregnant to reduce the chances of a bad outcome for woman and baby – the aim is to improve “*preconception*” health. Diabetes, hypertension, sexually transmitted diseases, obesity, smoking, heavy alcohol use, and depression, for example, all affect a woman's long-term health and can contribute to high-risk pregnancies and babies being born too small, too soon, or sick.

Shifting to a preconception paradigm promotes pregnancy planning by couples and services to improve health for women throughout their reproductive years. This increases the likelihood of women having healthy babies, if and when they want to do so. But, women need access to care.

Inadequate Health Coverage for Women

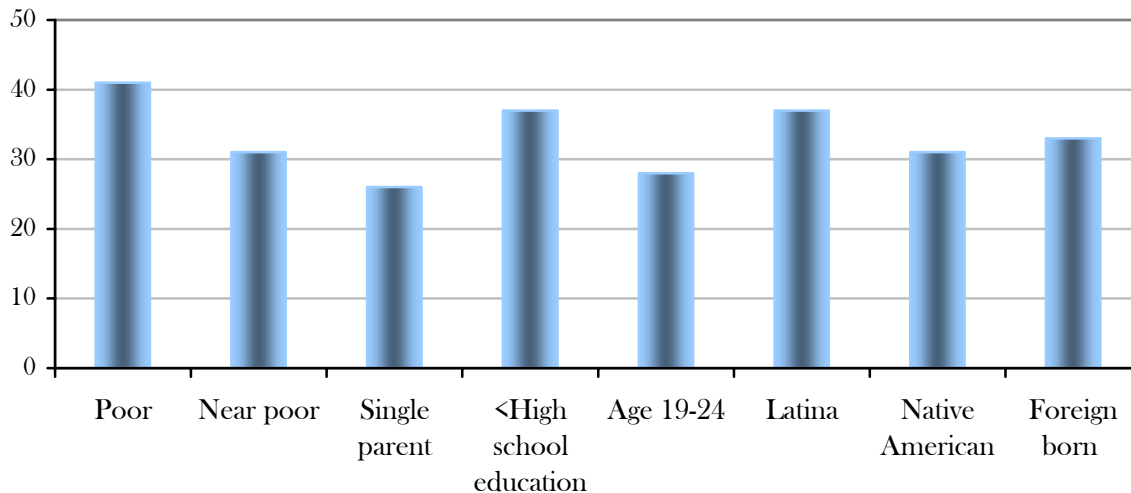
Improving health coverage is an essential step toward improving the health and well-being of women. Over 20% of all women of childbearing age (ages 18-44) and in that age group nearly 4 in 10 of low income women (below 200% of the federal poverty level) do not have health coverage -- public or private. Among uninsured women, 71% are low income.

Insurance Status of Low Income Women, US, 2007



In 2007, 11.4 million women were uninsured. Millions of non-pregnant women lost coverage in the past decade as a result of welfare reform policies, even before the current recession and growth in unemployment. Women who are younger, women of color, and those who have low income are particularly at risk for being uninsured. (See graph.) Providing universal access to health care would be a major step toward improving preconception health and health care.

Groups of Women Ages 18-64 who are at Higher Risk of Being Uninsured, US, 2007



Improving Health Policy to Improve Women's Health

- **First and foremost, Congress should enact health reform legislation that provides coverage for the 11.4 million women of childbearing age who are uninsured.** Most girls to age 21 have coverage thanks to Medicaid, CHIP, and employer-based plans. Women over age 65 have coverage through Medicare. Medicaid covers one in four women of childbearing age but too many millions of others remain uninsured.
- **Second, the federal government and state governments can use current policies and programs to better serve women.** Together, federal and state governments can use Medicaid options, increase the supply of publicly subsidized health clinics, and encourage the delivery of preconception screening and interventions in public health programs such as WIC nutrition programs, or family planning clinics.
- **Third, focus on the quality of women's health services.** Even when women do have access to health care, physicians often do not screen for reproductive health risks. Quality measures can help to improve the effectiveness of annual well-woman's visits, as well as postpartum visits to focus on improving woman's health following a pregnancy.

Congress has an opportunity to assure equitable access to preconception care to all women, regardless of income or race/ethnicity. Without investments to improve the health of women, the United States cannot reduce health care costs, bring down infant mortality rates, fight the obesity epidemic, or achieve many of our other national health objectives.

Insurance data source: Kaiser Family Foundation unpublished estimates from the 2008 ASEC Supplement to the Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau. Prepared August 10, 2009. Visit www.kff.org for more information on insurance status of Americans.

For more information on preconception health and health care, visit

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5506a1.htm> ;or <http://www.womenshealth.gov/Pregnancy/before-you-get-pregnant/preconception-health.cfm> ; or <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/preconception/default.htm> ;or http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/preconception_care.cfm