

National Women's Health Week

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This week marks National Women's Health Week – a nationwide observance that provides an opportunity to take stock of progress made in improving women's health status in Nevada and challenges that lie ahead.

State-level data and score cards from the National Women's Law Center (www.nwlc.org) and the Kaiser Family Foundation (www.kff.org) offer a fascinating portrait of women's health status in Nevada and how we compare with other US states.

These data indicate that while overall mortality rates for women in Nevada are higher than the national average, the heart disease mortality rate for Nevada women – the leading cause of death for women – is lower than the national average.

Cancer incidence or the rate of new invasive cancer cases for women is also lower than the national rate; however, the female cancer death rate in Nevada, 161.8 deaths per 100,000 population, is higher than the national rate of 153.8.

Data on breast and cervical cancer in Nevada provide a mixed picture. While the rate of new breast cancer cases is lower than the national average, Nevada's breast cancer mortality rate of 23.2 deaths per 100,000 women is slightly higher than the national rate of 22.8. Conversely, while cervical cancer incidence is higher than the nation as a whole, Nevada's cervical cancer mortality rate is lower than the national average.

One of the most troubling women's health indicators is lung cancer mortality. Nevada possesses the third highest female lung cancer mortality rate in the nation – 50.8 deaths per 100,000 residents – a figure well above the national rate of 40.5 and that of our neighboring state of Utah, which has the lowest lung cancer rate in the nation at 18.1.

The chance that a woman will develop lung cancer in her lifetime is about 1 in 16 – for cigarette smokers that risk is much higher. In Nevada, 20.0 percent of adult women currently smoke.

On a positive note, the NWLC and Kaiser data indicate that maternal death rates, stroke mortality, and diabetes mortality among women in Nevada are lower than national averages – in fact, Nevada has the lowest female diabetes mortality rate in the country.

The same data point to factors that account for higher than average overall mortality and cancer mortality rates among Nevada women, including first and foremost, the absolute importance of health insurance coverage.

Nevada has the second highest percentage of women who lack health insurance – 20.4 percent of adult women under the age of 65 are uninsured. And, while nearly one in five Nevada women live at or below the federal poverty level, only three percent of Nevada women are covered by Nevada Medicaid, our state's public health insurance program for low income residents.

Poor health insurance coverage may account for some of the anomalies of lower-than-average incidence and higher-than-average mortality in some diseases for Nevada women. In other words, treatment delayed or never received owing to the lack of health insurance may explain Nevada's lower incidence rates for cancer and breast cancer, yet higher-than-average, respectively, overall cancer and breast cancer mortality rates among US states.

Inadequate health insurance coverage certainly accounts for low levels of recommended preventive services use among Nevada women. Among US states and the District of Columbia, Nevada women rank 49th in recommended screening for breast cancer, 48th for cervical cancer screening, 35th for cholesterol screening, 44th for prenatal care, and dead last, pun intended, for colorectal cancer screening. Health insurance matters.

Provisions in the Affordable Care Act enacted last year require insurance plans to cover recommended preventative services for women, such as mammograms and colonoscopies, without charging deductibles, co-payments, or co-insurance. The ACA also assures women the right to see an OB/GYN without having to obtain a referral first. These immediate benefits for women, of course, presume insurance coverage, which Nevada women lack in abundance and which will be slow to remedy.

National Women's Health Week represents a time to encourage women to take steps to improve their physical and mental health and to lower their risks for certain diseases. It also represents an opportunity for Nevada policymakers and communities to make women's health a priority and to celebrate improvements in women's health that benefit all of us.

For more information on National Women's Health Week, visit www.womenshealth.gov/whw.

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