

Maternal Health at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas

How BCBSKS is Working to Improve Health for All Mothers

Understanding Maternal Health

Severe maternal morbidity (SMM) events are serious health problems mothers can face in pregnancy and childbirth. Both in Kansas and the U.S., these events are becoming more common. They can negatively affect the health of the mom and baby in both the short term and for years after. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas (BCBSKS) is committed to using data to learn more about these problems and to identify ways to help moms stay healthy during pregnancy.

Key Points

- BCBSKS members experience severe maternal morbidity cases, which are expensive for the health care system.
- SMM health problems are higher in rural and urban counties with fewer cases in semi-urban areas.
- Health risk factors that are strongly connected to poor maternal health include anemia, pre-term birth, pre-eclampsia, and chronic hypertension.
- Anemia (low iron in the blood) is a big concern, because it is a common risk factor and has a big impact on serious maternal health problems.
- BCBSKS is working on several solutions to improve maternal health for all mothers in Kansas.

Severe Maternal Health Outcomes at BCBSKS

SMM events are rare, but when they happen, they are costly.

Between 2019-2024, 52.5 per 10,000 births experienced a negative maternal health outcome. This is similar, but lower than the Kansas rate (62.1 per 10,000 pregnancy hospitalizations for 2016-2020).

Any negative maternal health outcome in BCBSKS membership is estimated to cost an additional \$5,840 per event.

Impact on Different Populations

BCBSKS members in both rural and urban areas have higher levels of serious maternal health issues.

- Rural areas have fewer overall Kansas births but have a high share of SMM cases.
- Urban areas see the highest amount of negative maternal health outcomes.
- Semi-urban areas account for about 25% of Kansas births, but only 14.9% of negative maternal health events.

Health Risks for BCBSKS Mothers

Certain health conditions and social factors can make it more likely for someone to experience a serious maternal health complication. These contributing factors are broad and sometimes difficult to detect.

Among BCBSKS members, the health risks for SMM events are more common than the negative maternal health events themselves. The frequency of risks is expected to increase in the future.

The health risks for serious maternal health problems are expensive, like the health events themselves, although generally at a lower cost.

Common and frequent risk factors are less expensive. For example, anemia, which is a common risk factor, has lower costs (\$1,409 increased cost per case) compared to a more rare event like pre-term birth (\$5,204 per case).

Risk Factor Connection to Health Outcomes

Anemia—or low iron—is an important issue for maternal health, because it's very common, expected to increase overtime, and is strongly connected to severe health problems during pregnancy.

Other common risk factors for serious pregnancy-related health problems include having a high body weight (BMI over 40) at delivery and gestational diabetes.

Health risks like pre-eclampsia and preterm birth are strongly connected to serious health problems for mothers. These problems can include fluid buildup in the lungs (pulmonary edema), kidney failure, trouble breathing (respiratory distress), or severe infection (sepsis).

Risk Differences Among Groups

Mothers of all races and ethnicities have risk factors that can cause health problems, but each vary by number and which risk factor has a high likelihood of causing issues.

- For an anemia diagnosis, Black mothers are at a 17% increased likelihood which is higher than Asian mothers (6.2%) and Hispanic mothers (2.0%).
- White mothers are at an increased risk of hypertension compared to mothers of other races and ethnicities.

What BCBSKS is Doing to Help

BCBSKS has set a goal to lower SMM cases from 52.5 to 44.0 per 10,000 births. To make this happen, we are using a quality improvement framework to implement the following actions to improve health for all moms:

- **Use Data for Decision-Making:** Use data to identify high-risk pregnancies early to connect them to resources.
- **Pregnancy Disease Management Program:** Increase enrollment of high-risk pregnancies in the BCBSKS Pregnancy Disease Management program, which includes one-on-one guidance with a nurse.
- **Blue Distinction Centers:** Working with hospitals to earn Blue Distinction Center - Maternal Health designation, which demonstrates high maternal health care quality.
- **Support of Learning & Education:** BCBSKS is partnering with organizations to increase education, training, and awareness in the maternal health field.
 - **Kansas Birth Equity Network:** Additional training opportunities through a partnership with University of Kansas Medical Center for healthcare facilities on birth equity.
 - **Baby Talk:** Partnered with KU Wichita Center for Health Care to increase enrollment opportunities in free prenatal education classes for moms.