

CHAPTER 2: THE HEALTH OF WOMEN

Women in the U.S. are overall a generally healthy population, and most report that they are in good health. A sizable minority, however, deal on a daily basis with a wide range of chronic conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, and depression. Many of these are health problems that require ongoing medical attention and that can limit their ability to work or otherwise interfere with their participation in daily activities.

The health of women is one of the strongest determinants of whether and how they will use the health care system. While there are considerable differences in the type and extent of certain conditions between men and women, there are also major differences in the prevalence of certain health problems among subgroups of women. Typically, women who are poorer or older are the most at risk, but this is not always the case.

This section presents the key findings from the Kaiser Women's Health Survey on the health concerns facing women across their lifespans. Special attention is given here to differences in the health of women based on their age, income level, and racial/ethnic background. This section also examines the prevalence of anxiety or depression among women.



Exhibit 2a

Health Status Indicators and Chronic Health Conditions, Women and Men Ages 18 and Older

| Indicators | Women | Men |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------|------|
| Fair/Poor health | 19% | 21% |
| Have disability or condition that limits activity | 14% | 13% |
| Have chronic condition requiring ongoing treatment | 38% | 30%* |
| Condition [^] | | |
| Arthritis | 26% | 17%* |
| Asthma/Other respiratory | 15% | 8%* |
| Cancer | 6% | 4% |
| Diabetes | 10% | 8% |
| Heart Disease | 7% | 10%* |
| High Cholesterol | 22% | 24% |
| Hypertension | 26% | 22% |
| Obesity | 13% | 4%* |
| Osteoporosis (Women 45 and older) | 16% | ~ |
| Stroke | 2% | 1% |
| Thyroid | 11% | ~ |

*Significantly different from women, $p < .05$.

[^] Percent of women reporting that condition was diagnosed by physician in past 5 years.

~ Men were not asked this question.

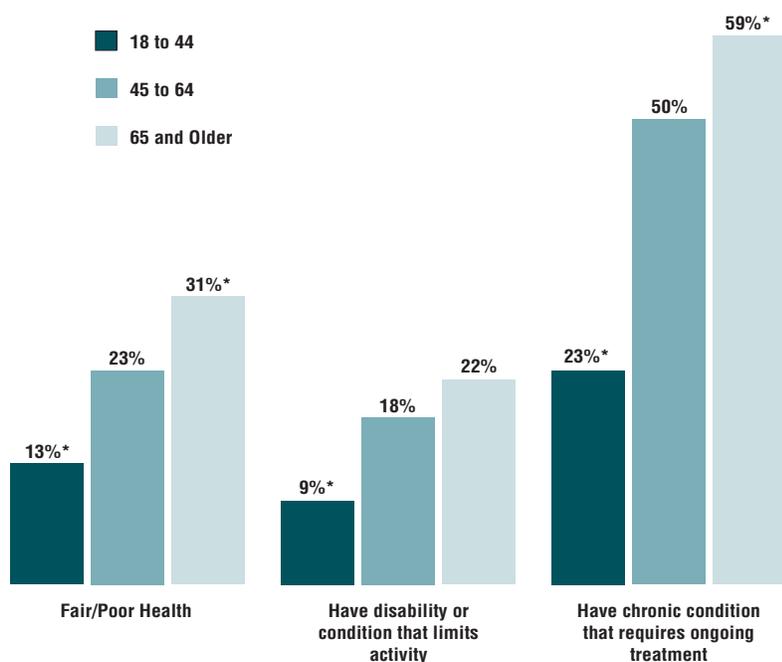
Data source: 2004 Kaiser Women's Health Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation.

Most women in the U.S. are in good health with eight in 10 reporting excellent, very good, or good health. However, a sizable minority—nearly one in five (19%)—report fair or poor health.

Fourteen percent of women have a disability, health condition, or handicap that limits their ability to participate fully in everyday activities. Nearly four in 10 women (38%), have a chronic condition that requires ongoing medical attention, compared with 30% of men.

Women in the survey were asked about selected chronic health conditions that were diagnosed by a physician in the past five years. The most prevalent—affecting approximately one in four women—are arthritis (26%), hypertension (26%), and high cholesterol (22%). While women are generally affected by the same types of chronic health problems as men, there are some important differences in the prevalence between the sexes. Women are more likely than men to say they have arthritis, asthma, and obesity.

Exhibit 2b
**Health Status Indicators, by Age Group,
 Women Ages 18 and Older**



* Significantly different from 45 to 64, p <.05.

Data source: 2004 Kaiser Women's Health Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation.

As women age, their health status can deteriorate and increase their need for ongoing medical care. Midlife (45 to 64) and older women (65 and older) are more likely to be in fair or poor health, have limitations in activity due to health, and have chronic conditions requiring medical attention, compared to women in their reproductive years (ages 18 to 44).

Six in 10 women ages 65 and older and half of women ages 45 to 64 have a chronic condition that requires ongoing medical treatment. Even in the younger age group, nearly one-fourth have at least one chronic condition that requires continuing medical care.

Exhibit 2c
**Chronic Health Conditions, by Age Group,
 Women Ages 18 and Older**

| Condition [^] | 18 to 44 | 45 to 64 | 65 and Older |
|--------------------------|----------|----------|--------------|
| Arthritis | 9%* | 32% | 61%* |
| Asthma/Other respiratory | 12%* | 18% | 16% |
| Cancer | 3%* | 8% | 10% |
| Diabetes | 5%* | 13% | 20%* |
| Heart Disease | 2%* | 8% | 18%* |
| High Cholesterol | 10%* | 29% | 45%* |
| Hypertension | 10%* | 33% | 58%* |
| Obesity | 10%* | 18% | 13% |
| Osteoporosis | ~ | 11% | 26%* |
| Stroke | <1% | 2% | 9%* |
| Thyroid | 6%* | 14% | 16% |

*Significantly different from 45 to 64, p <.05.

[^]Percent of women reporting that condition was diagnosed by a physician in past 5 years.

~Women ages 18 to 44 were not asked this question.

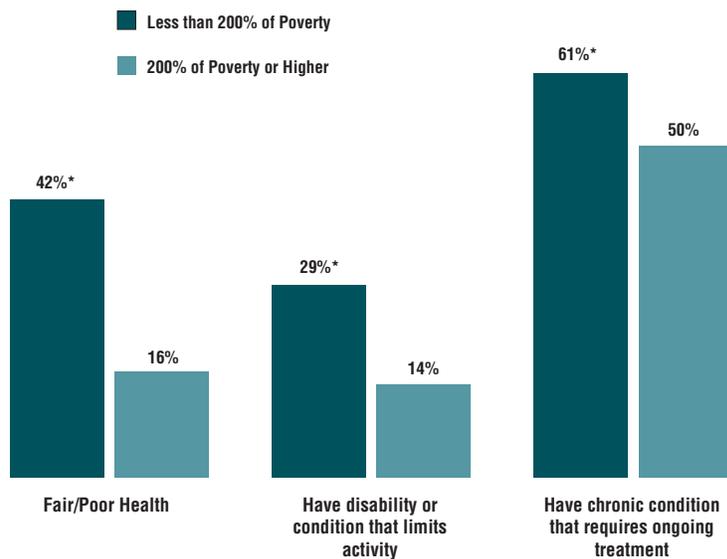
Data source: 2004 Kaiser Women's Health Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation.

The prevalence of most chronic health conditions also increases with age. The most common conditions among midlife and older women are arthritis, hypertension, and high cholesterol.

Other conditions also affect a notable fraction of women. Among midlife women, 18% report asthma, 14% have thyroid problems, and 13% report diabetes. For older women, approximately one in four have osteoporosis (26%), diabetes affects 20% of women, 18% report heart disease, and 16% have thyroid problems. These are all conditions that typically require ongoing medical management, often with prescription drugs.

While the presence of chronic conditions is lower in women ages 18 to 44, approximately one in 10 report asthma (12%), high cholesterol (10%), hypertension (10%), obesity (10%), and arthritis (9%).

Exhibit 2d
**Health Status Indicators, by Poverty Level,
 Women Ages 45 and Older**



Note: 200% of poverty was \$29,552 for a family of three in 2004.
 * Significantly different from 200% of poverty or higher, p <.05.
 Data source: 2004 Kaiser Women's Health Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation.

Women who are low-income are in poorer health than women with higher incomes. There is a large body of research that documents the association between poverty and poor health status.³ In this survey, the most striking income differentials are found among women 45 and older.

Low-income women are nearly three times as likely to report fair or poor health. Over one-quarter report a disability or condition that limits participation in daily activities and six in 10 have a chronic condition that requires ongoing medical care, which may be harder to obtain for women with low incomes (see Exhibit 5b).

Exhibit 2e
**Chronic Health Conditions, by Poverty Level,
 Women Ages 45 and Older**

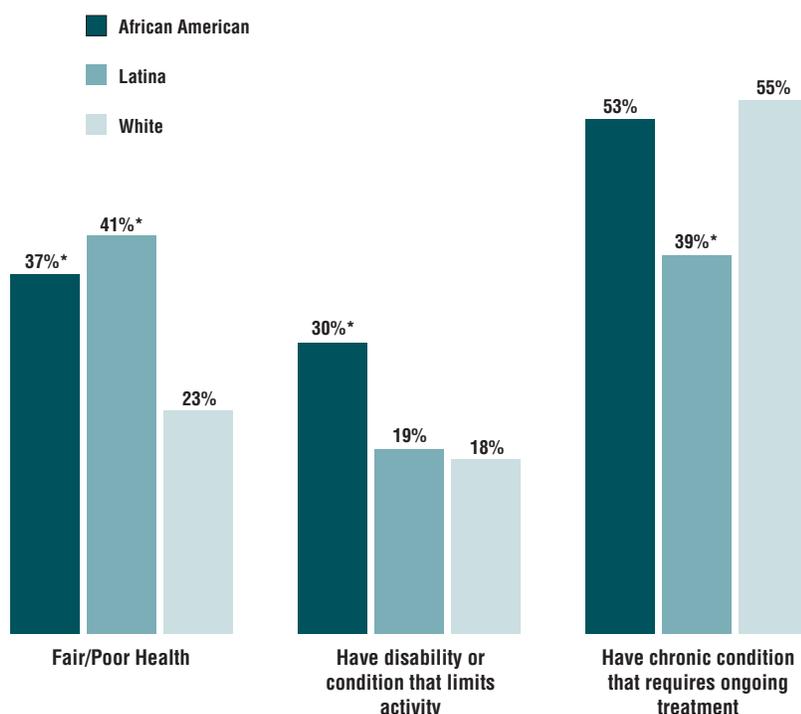
| Condition [^] | Less than 200% of poverty | 200% of poverty or higher |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Arthritis | 52%* | 34% |
| Asthma/Other respiratory | 25%* | 15% |
| Cancer | 10% | 7% |
| Diabetes | 27%* | 10% |
| Heart Disease | 17%* | 8% |
| High Cholesterol | 42%* | 31% |
| Hypertension | 52%* | 36% |
| Obesity | 18% | 16% |
| Osteoporosis | 18% | 14% |
| Stroke | 9%* | 3% |
| Thyroid | 12% | 15% |

Note: 200% of the federal poverty threshold was \$29,552 for a family of three in 2004.
[^]Percent of women reporting that condition was diagnosed by a physician in past 5 years.
 *Significantly different from 200% of poverty or higher, p <.05.
 Data source: 2004 Kaiser Women's Health Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation.

Low-income women are also more likely to experience a broad range of chronic health problems than their higher-income counterparts. Among women ages 45 and older, those with low incomes have considerably higher rates of several chronic conditions than higher-income women. Arthritis and hypertension affect over half of low-income women in this age group. Furthermore, their asthma rates are one and a half times as high as those for higher-income women (25% vs. 15%), and diabetes rates are two and a half times higher (27% vs. 10%).

Among younger women (ages 18 to 44), the income disparity is evident although less marked. Low-income women of reproductive age have higher rates of hypertension (13% vs. 8%), heart disease (4% vs. 1%), depression (30% vs. 20%), asthma (17% vs. 9%), and similar rates of the other conditions when compared to higher-income women (data not shown).

Exhibit 2f
**Health Status Indicators,
 by Race/Ethnicity, Women Ages 45 and Older**



* Significantly different from white women, p <.05.

Data source: 2004 Kaiser Women's Health Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation.

Race and ethnicity are also associated with differences in health status and in the prevalence of certain chronic conditions, but there is no single pattern.

Among women 45 and older, African American women (37%) and Latinas (41%) are more likely to report being in fair or poor health than white women (23%). African American women are the most likely to report a disability or condition that limits their activity (30%), and are as likely as white women to report a medical condition that requires ongoing treatment (53% and 55%, respectively). In contrast, 39% of Latinas report a chronic condition requiring ongoing care.

Exhibit 2g
**Chronic Health Conditions, by Race/Ethnicity,
 Women Ages 45 and Older**

| Condition [^] | African American | Latina | White |
|--------------------------|------------------|--------|-------|
| Arthritis | 50% | 40% | 41% |
| Asthma/Other respiratory | 21% | 18% | 16% |
| Cancer | 9% | 6% | 9% |
| Diabetes | 29%* | 22%* | 13% |
| Heart Disease | 15% | 9% | 11% |
| High Cholesterol | 42% | 32% | 34% |
| Hypertension | 57%* | 48% | 39% |
| Obesity | 19% | 14% | 16% |
| Osteoporosis | 6%* | 8%* | 18% |
| Stroke | 3% | 7% | 4% |
| Thyroid | 13% | 15% | 15% |

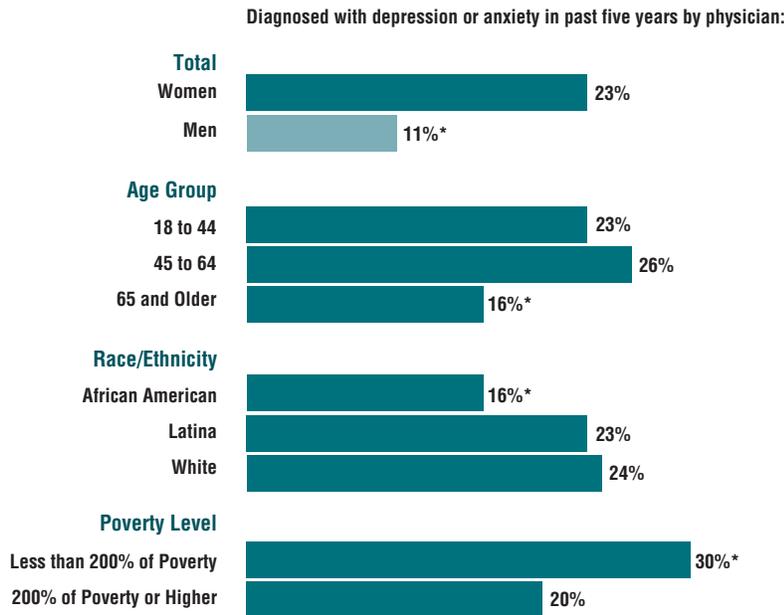
*Significantly different from white women, p <.05.

[^]Percent of women reporting that condition was diagnosed by a physician in past 5 years.

Data source: 2004 Kaiser Women's Health Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation.

Hypertension and arthritis affect upwards of half of African American women 45 and older. High cholesterol (42%) and diabetes (29%) are also relatively common in this population of women. Similarly, nearly one-half of Latinas 45 and older have hypertension, one-third have high cholesterol, and slightly over one in five have diabetes. Compared to women of color, white women have similar rates of arthritis, lower rates of diabetes, and higher rates of osteoporosis.

Exhibit 2h
Depression and Anxiety, by Selected Factors,
Women Ages 18 and Older



Note: 200% of poverty was \$29,552 for a family of three in 2004.
 *Significantly different from reference group (Women, 45 to 64, White, 200% of poverty or higher), $p < .05$.
 Data source: 2004 Kaiser Women's Health Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation.

Anxiety and depression affect approximately one-quarter of all women (23%), twice the rate for men (11%). Even among seniors, who have lower rates than younger women, 16% are affected by these mental health issues. The mental health status of women is often overlooked, yet it plays a crucial role in their overall health and well-being.

White women report higher rates of depression and anxiety than African American women (24% vs. 16%). Almost one-third of low-income women report these mental health problems, a higher rate than women with family incomes at or over 200% of poverty.