



# BUILDING A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

An Ipsos / Materna Medical Collaboratory Paper

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For decades, women's health has been a nuanced and often taboo topic. The recent call from the White House for \$19B of long-overdue investment in women's health highlights the fact that for far too long, women's health concerns have not received the attention they deserve. While significant strides have been made in recent years, overwhelmingly, our knowledge surrounding the health needs of approximately half of the world's population lacks attention and scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> From chronic conditions to the often-overlooked complexities of mental health, these issues struggle to find consistent and comprehensive awareness. The result is a world where women's health and well-being are diminished by a blind spot that can and must be overcome.

A more inclusive approach within the health insurance industry is crucial to address this gap. Health plans need to ensure coverage of digital health and medical technology solutions/devices as well as a comprehensive care team for various women's health issues. The coverage should include underdiagnosed and under-discussed conditions, which would increase accessibility, awareness and ultimately improve women's health outcomes. Furthermore, by leveraging data analytics, insurance companies are in a unique position to identify at-risk populations, tailor care plans, and develop outreach programs specifically geared toward women's health needs.

# The Consequences of Insufficient Attention: A Multifaceted Problem

The consequences of insufficient attention paid to women's health issues are far-reaching and manifesting in several ways:

## 1. Gender Bias in Research

Historically, women were excluded from clinical trials, leading to a significant data gap regarding their specific needs and responses to medical interventions. This resulted in treatment protocols primarily based on male data, potentially leading to misdiagnosis and ineffective treatment for women.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Misconceptions and Stigma

Many women's health issues are often downplayed, dismissed, or attributed to emotional factors, leading to delayed diagnoses and inadequate treatment. This can be seen in the historical dismissal of women's pain or the societal stigma surrounding conditions like endometriosis, pelvic floor dysfunction, etc.

## 3. Lack of Awareness

There is a widespread lack of awareness about various women's health issues, both among the general public and healthcare professionals. This can lead to difficulty finding accurate information, accessing proper care, and advocating for oneself. The bullwhip effect of a lack of investment in women's health conditions, no matter how prevalent and impactful in women's lives, has meant that the curricula in medical schools have relatively little to draw from in educating aspiring physicians. As such, a recent study by AARP showed that nearly 80 percent of medical residents admit that they feel "barely comfortable" discussing or treating menopause.<sup>4</sup> This situation leaves the 60M of American people in menopause unable to easily find informed medical care or relevant technology.



**While vaginismus affects up to 25 million Americans, it is poorly understood. Many patients who experience it don't even realize it's a recognized medical condition and often think they are the only ones with a rare and isolating problem. This is a direct result of the stigma associated with speaking openly about common pelvic floor conditions that women experience. Vaginismus is a very treatable condition, and most women recover fully with the right treatment. Materna is leading the effort to normalize the conversation and get validated, scientific information into the hands of the people who need it,"**

**Tracy MacNeal  
CEO, Materna Medical, Inc**

## From Underserved to Empowered: Companies Foster Progress in Women's Health

However, amidst this landscape of unmet needs, companies like Materna Medical are a beacon of hope for a more equitable future. Materna Medical, a start-up in Silicon Valley, is dedicated to empowering women to protect and restore pelvic health by providing first-mover medical technology in OBGYN, fostering open conversations, and offering clinical education and support for patients and healthcare providers. They launched Milli in 2019, the first and only FDA-cleared, expanding dilator that is indicated for vaginismus and related painful sex.<sup>5</sup>

### In their own words: Patients' Experience with Milli



**"Choosing Milli was a game-changer for me! Unlike other dilators, Milli's unique expandable design made it incredibly convenient to use. It's an investment that has been worth every penny and more!"**

**"Milli is a game changer for my journey. Unlike other dilators, I can start with a small size and slowly increase the vagina stretch as I can tolerate."**

The company also developed Materna Prep, a device seeking to prevent pelvic floor injuries during childbirth, which is now in clinical trial, supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health, venture capital, and private equity investments.<sup>6</sup> Materna Medical has been featured in Forbes twice in the past 2 years and was a Fast Company World Changing Ideas Finalist.

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## A Case Study: Pelvic Floor Dysfunction

A prime example of an under-discussed and under-researched area of women's pelvic health is vaginismus. This condition involves involuntary muscle spasms around the vagina, which can make activities such as sexual intercourse, tampons, or undergoing pelvic exams painful or impossible. It can also significantly impact various aspects of a woman's life including intimacy, sexual health, and overall well-being. Vaginismus can affect up to 17% of women at any time in her life.<sup>7</sup>

Materna Medical partnered with Ipsos Healthcare to conduct quantitative research to understand senior women's experience with vaginal and pelvic floor pain or discomfort. Vaginismus is a common condition among women over 45 that results from menopausal vaginal tissue becoming dryer and thinner, making sex painful or impossible and resulting in a chronic vaginal spasm related to anticipation of pain and anxiety during penetration. For this research, Ipsos deployed a 10-minute survey to 200 women aged 65 years and older. Results from the research revealed that despite 100% of the women in our sample experiencing varying pelvic floor discomfort and pain, only 55% have a formal diagnosis, and approximately 30% consult with a physician to manage their symptoms. For women living with vaginismus, the lack of awareness and understanding surrounding this condition often leads to delayed diagnosis, inadequate treatment options, and feelings of isolation and shame.



## A Case Study: Pelvic Floor Dysfunction *continued*

Fig 1.1: Symptoms Experienced in the Past 12 Months (n=200)

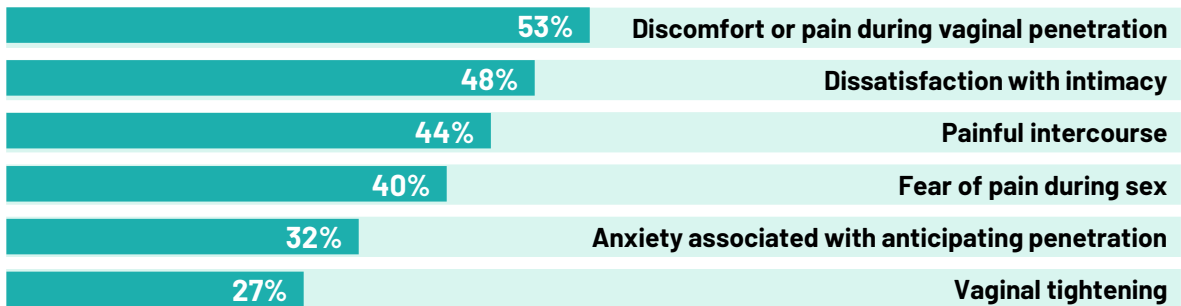
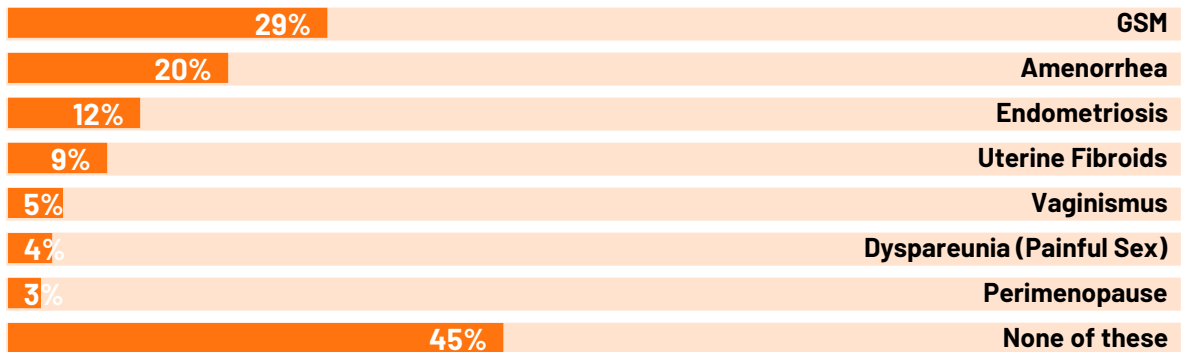
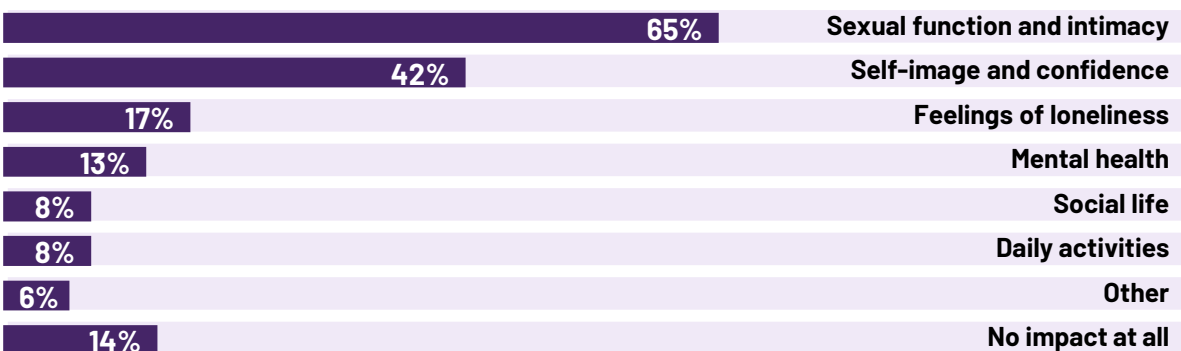


Fig 1.2: Formal Diagnosed Conditions (n=200)



Symptoms of pelvic floor dysfunction impacts seniors' quality of life including their sexual health. The participants in this study identified varying impacts on their lives.

Fig 1.3: Impact of Symptoms on Life (n=200)



Additionally, women's health issues can also impact their partners. In a recent Suzy poll conducted by Materna Medical, 15% of men 65+ years old avoid sex because it's painful for their female partner. This can lead to emotional strain, reduced sexual satisfaction, and potential relationship difficulties for both partners.

## Role of Digital Health and Health Insurance Companies in Addressing This Critical Need



The rise of digital health tools and a growing focus on inclusivity within the health insurance industry present a unique opportunity to bridge this gap and empower women to take charge of their health.

Digital health tools can be instrumental in this transformation. Educational apps and online platforms can provide women with evidence-based information on various health topics tailored to their specific needs and life

stages. Telemedicine consultations with female healthcare providers can improve access to care, especially in underserved areas. Remote monitoring tools that track vitals and health data allow for early detection of potential issues. Additionally, symptom trackers and management tools can empower women to understand their bodies, identify patterns, and communicate more effectively with healthcare providers. Digital platforms can also offer discreet and accessible mental health resources, addressing a growing concern among women.

One example of a successful partnership between a digital health company and health insurers is Mae. Mae focuses on supporting black women during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care. They provide weekly health tracking, personalized lifestyle and care tips, and access to culturally competent experts. Their focus on culturally competent care is a crucial step towards building a more equitable healthcare landscape. They empower women to take charge of their health journey and advocate for improved access to quality care<sup>8</sup>.



**Collaboration between digital health, MedTech, and insurance companies** is key to creating accessible, effective, and inclusive solutions that empower women to take charge of their health and well-being. By addressing the historical data gap and fostering a more informed and empowered generation of women, who can move towards a future where women's health receives the focus and quality care it deserves.

# How Ipsos Healthcare Advisory Partners with Digital Health and MedTech Companies

## Developing a Compelling Value Story

Ipsos is particularly adept at guiding digital health and MedTech companies in understanding the health insurer perspective and intentionally curating meaningful value stories for targeted health insurer organizations. We partner with you to understand ...

...who the right division/business decision maker for your product is

...what evidence you need to meet their criteria for partnership/reimbursement

...and how to develop a compelling value story that speaks to the unique needs of specific health insurers



## Member-centric Approach in Developing Digital Health Solutions

Ipsos is well positioned to support digital health and MedTech companies utilize a needs-based approach given our extensive knowledge surrounding health plan needs, human-centered design, and the product life cycle.



**“Americans expect healthcare technology to be covered by insurance. The prevalence and deep impact on both member satisfaction and healthcare costs that could be achieved by Milli as a covered benefit was a key outcome of this research. Plans find this kind of data compelling and motivating to cover women’s health in affordable and effective ways,”** said MacNeal.





# How Ipsos Healthcare Advisory Partners with Health Insurance Companies

## Women's Health Journey Mapping

Ipsos conducts in-depth research to understand women's specific needs and challenges at different life stages related to healthcare access, communication, navigation, and resource availability. Additionally, we map out all the key points of interaction between women and their health plan, from establishing care to managing chronic conditions and identify the key opportunities for communication and intervention.



## Product and Program Development

Product development is most successful when utilizing feedback from the end user (members) through each unique stage of the product development life cycle process. By identifying feedback from members iteratively throughout the design process, health plans can better create products that meet the needs of their members, improve health outcomes, and reduce the cost of care.

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