



# ISSUE BRIEF:

## Oral Health for Pregnant Veterans

### PREGNANT VETERANS IN THE VA



Women are the [fastest-growing cohort](#) of veterans who use Department of Veterans Affairs services. The VA currently provides health care to approximately 600,000 women—**half of whom are of childbearing age**. Since 2014, pregnancies in women veterans using VA care have increased by more than 80%. Organizations like [Disabled American Veterans](#) and [Veterans of Foreign Wars](#) are prioritizing integrated healthcare for all veterans, especially those who have a history of toxic exposure.

As of Oct. 1, 2023, veterans now have access to maternity care coordinators from the beginning of their pregnancy to 12 months postpartum—an expansion from the previous end date of eight weeks. These coordinators help navigate health care inside and outside the VA, connect veterans with care after delivery, ensure access to follow-up screenings and more. VA maternity care coordinators also screen for social, physical and mental health concerns; answer questions about billing; provide resources for childbirth education; and offer lactation consulting during pregnancy and after delivery.

[The VA's clinical guidelines for healthcare during pregnancy](#) state that periodontal disease, although common during pregnancy, is both preventable and curable. While recommendations for treatment of periodontal disease cannot be endorsed specifically at this time for the purpose of decreasing adverse fetal and maternal pregnancy outcomes (e.g., preterm birth, low birth weight, pregnancy loss, preeclampsia, GDM), several studies have shown there may be an association between periodontal disease and increased risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes. Pregnancy is not a contraindication to most dental services, though some procedures requiring general anesthesia may be deferred to the postpartum period. Oral health care is not only a component of a healthy pregnancy, but evidence suggests that most infants and young children acquire caries-causing bacteria from their mothers. Routine dental care, including x-rays (with proper anatomic shielding) and periodontal therapy, along with good oral hygiene, should be encouraged throughout pregnancy.

### Current VA Coverage for Pregnant Veterans

**What types of maternity care does VA cover? As a pregnant Veteran, you will receive support throughout your entire pregnancy. VA also covers initial care for your newborn. These services include:**

- Regular prenatal care, including ultrasounds
- Full physical exams and lab tests
- Prenatal education and screening
- Obstetrical ultrasounds
- Genetic tests and specialty consults
- Prescription drugs and prenatal vitamins
- Lactation support
- Support and services in case of miscarriage or stillbirth
- Social work and mental health services

## Impact of Pregnancy & Post-Partum Coverage

While there are no current studies examining the outcomes for pregnant veterans, similar studies assessing cost and outcomes for Medicaid beneficiaries have established the importance of dental coverage. According to the [American Dental Association](#), dental coverage and utilization during pregnancy reduces inflammation, addresses issues like periodontitis, and averts serious outcomes like preterm birth and infant mortality. Moreover, dental benefits during pregnancy and up to a year postpartum can save approximately \$1,500 annually per veteran by reducing risks and complications incurred through both medical and non-medical costs.

## Opportunities for Oral Health and Pregnant Veterans

- » No data or research briefs currently exist examining the oral health and well-being of pregnant veterans; however, there is extensive research regarding pregnant people and oral healthcare access both during pregnancy and postpartum.
- » Opportunities to both collect and analyze data exist through VSO support and through PRAMS and BRFSS surveillance systems.
- » The number of pregnant veterans is relatively small, making a policy ask in the current political climate feasible. Pregnancy is a temporary condition for veterans and therefore expanding temporary coverage would be impactful while also fiscally feasible.
- » The VA has extensive infrastructure to leverage inclusive oral healthcare throughout multiple care delivery points. **Potential oral health leverage points include:**
  - » Requiring an oral health screening for every pregnant veteran
  - » Giving dental care supplies, like toothbrushes and prescription toothpaste, to pregnant veterans as part of their supply packages
  - » Facilitating integrated care and education between physicians and dental clinicians in the treatment process
  - » Oral health education for pregnant veterans during pregnancy appointments



## Potential Policy Approaches for Pregnant Veterans

- » Adjusting temporary eligibility for comprehensive dental care coverage to pregnant veterans and up to one year postpartum.
- » Approaching the Secretary of the VA to examine rules/guidelines to require oral health screenings, oral health education, and dental care kits for pregnant veterans using existing infrastructure and policies.
- » Adjusting rule interpretations to list dental as a "specialty consult" for pregnant and postpartum veterans to advise on dental care and treatment.
- » Asking for a GAO report, a report from the VA, or a congressional hearing on expanding access to dental care for pregnant and postpartum veterans.
- » Offering free or reduced premiums within the VADIP program for pregnant and postpartum veterans.

## Links and Resources

- » [VA expands maternity care coordination for veterans](#)
- » [VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline For the Management Of Pregnancy](#)
- » [TRICARE: Dental Care During Pregnancy](#)
- » [Improving Access to Dental Care for Pregnant Women through Education, Integration of Health Services, Insurance Coverage, an Appropriate Dental Workforce, and Research](#)
- » [Medicaid: Dental Coverage for Pregnant & Postpartum Women](#)

## COLLABORATORS

This report was produced by AIDPH, DAV and VFW.

