With the majority of US women of childbearing age employed outside the home, it's important for employers to be aware of the impact of underdiagnosed postpartum depression (PPD)\(^1\). PPD affects about one in nine new mothers and, ultimately, entire families, making it one of the most common medical complications of pregnancy and childbirth\(^2\) associated with significant total wellbeing effects\(^3\) and higher healthcare costs. In fact, all-cause medical and pharmaceutical costs were 22% higher in the year after delivery in households with a mother with PPD compared with matched control households\(^4\).

### UNDERSTANDING PPD

PPD is distinct from the “baby blues,” due to the timing, duration and/or severity of depressive symptoms such as frequent crying, worrying, irritability, fatigue, sadness and mood swings\(^5\). The baby blues typically peak at five days postdelivery and resolve within 10 days\(^6\). But PPD can be debilitating, sharing symptoms similar to those of a major depressive disorder including, but not limited to:

- Trouble bonding with the baby
- Difficulty caring for the baby
- Thoughts of self-harm or harm to the baby
- Experiencing anger or rage
- Withdrawal from friends and family\(^7\)

Mothers at greatest risk include those with a history of depression, substance

### ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS:

1. **Ensure that benefits include comprehensive maternity care:**
   - Preconception, prenatal and postpartum services.

2. **Set expectations with health plans about PPD education, screening and treatment initiatives and options for employees and providers.**

3. **Check to be sure EAP vendors are equipped to screen for PPD and to make needed referrals.**

4. **Promote screening recommendations and treatment options to employees, including education about the emotional and social factors of PPD.**

5. **Educate employees about maternity leave, their EEOC rights, parental leave, and other available support policies.**
use disorders, increased life stress, low socioeconomic status, lack of social support, single status, and older age (over 40). A difficult pregnancy or birth, giving birth to twins or other multiples, marital/relationship problems, and unplanned pregnancy are also known to increase the risk of PPD.

**WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO ENSURE ACCESS TO MEDICAL CARE THROUGHOUT THE PREGNANCY JOURNEY**

Adding PPD to the mental health agenda will help employers influence change that leads to reducing stigma, broadening networks, improving access, addressing lower reimbursement schedules, and rewarding for certain performance levels in the ongoing journey toward achieving true mental health parity in the US. Here’s how employers can take action.

1. **Ensure that benefits include comprehensive maternity care: Preconception, prenatal and postpartum services.**
   - **Review your benefits:** Does your current pregnancy benefit include coverage for preconception, prenatal and postpartum services? Discuss current coverage and utilization management with health plans and benefit consultants to ensure the full spectrum of maternity care is covered. In addition, a comprehensive maternity leave package eases confusion and stress for expectant parents, making it easier for them if complications such as PPD arise.

2. **Set expectations with health plans and consultants about PPD education, screening and treatment initiatives and options.**
   - **For employees:** Review and assess health plan communications for every phase of maternity planning and care, checking for inclusion of PPD education and support. Promote credible patient resources such as postpartumdepression.com.
   - **For providers:** Review and assess health plan communications for PPD screening promotion and standards for treating patients. Recommend provider resources such as knowppd.com, which offers patient screening tools, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) care recommendations, and more.
Local and regional healthcare coalitions and their members have a unique opportunity to collaborate, using their collective voice to drive health care policy that leads to state-mandated PPD screening.

3. Be sure EAP vendors are equipped to screen for PPD and to make needed referrals.
   - Conduct a simple assessment with EAP vendors to ensure consistent promotion of all support services related to maternal health, including PPD. Do they have a database of PPD signs and symptoms? Do they have resources to help patients talk to their caregivers? Are they actively engaging callers to ensure appropriate follow-up care?

4. Promote screening and treatment options to employees:
   - **Screening:** Screening for PPD plays a critical role in early diagnosis which, in turn, leads to earlier treatment and better outcomes for new mothers and their families. In addition to nationally recognized organizations involved with the development of PPD screening and recommendations, a growing number of states have enacted policies aimed at addressing many challenges associated with perinatal behavioral health needs, while also encouraging routine PPD screening by HCPs.

   - **Treatment:** The good news is there are effective medical treatments for PPD, including the first FDA-approved approved drug designed to treat women with PPD. Remind employees of the importance of working with their health care providers to choose the best course to wellness. Whether through counseling/talk therapy, appropriate medication, or a combination of both, PPD is a treatable medical condition.

   - **Multiple communication channels:** Use opportunities such as group and individual employee meetings, company intranet, information in lactation rooms, and EAP promotions to provide PPD education.

5. Educate employees about their rights and available support policies.
   - Many expectant parents are not aware of the rights afforded them by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Companies with more than 15 employees are required to comply with the 1998 Pregnancy Discrimination Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Under these, employers must make the same allowances such as extended unpaid leave or workplace accommodations to women with pregnancy-related disabilities as they do to employees with ADA-covered disabilities. Reassure working mothers...
that they cannot be terminated, demoted or denied promotion for experiencing a postpartum mental illness. As stated above, a comprehensive maternity leave package offers peace of mind to expectant parents and protects employers.

Even with state-mandated screening and concerted educational initiatives, PPD remains underdiagnosed and under-recognized as a serious medical condition. Continued communication, education and awareness of PPD contributes to improving outcomes for patients as they navigate their postpartum journeys. Employers play an important role in closing PPD screening and treatment gaps so families have the healthiest possible beginnings. In turn, with a shrinking talent pool and competition for “employer-of-choice” status, addressing the needs of families is healthy for employees and employers alike.

ENDNOTES
4 Huang et al. AMCP Annual Meeting 2019.
5 Earls MF et al. Pediatrics. 2010;126(5):1032-1039
9 https://www1.nichd.nih.gov/ncmhep/initiatives/moms-mental-health-matters/Documents/PreparedForAnything.pdf#search=PPD
10 EEOC v. The Lash Group. 2014.