

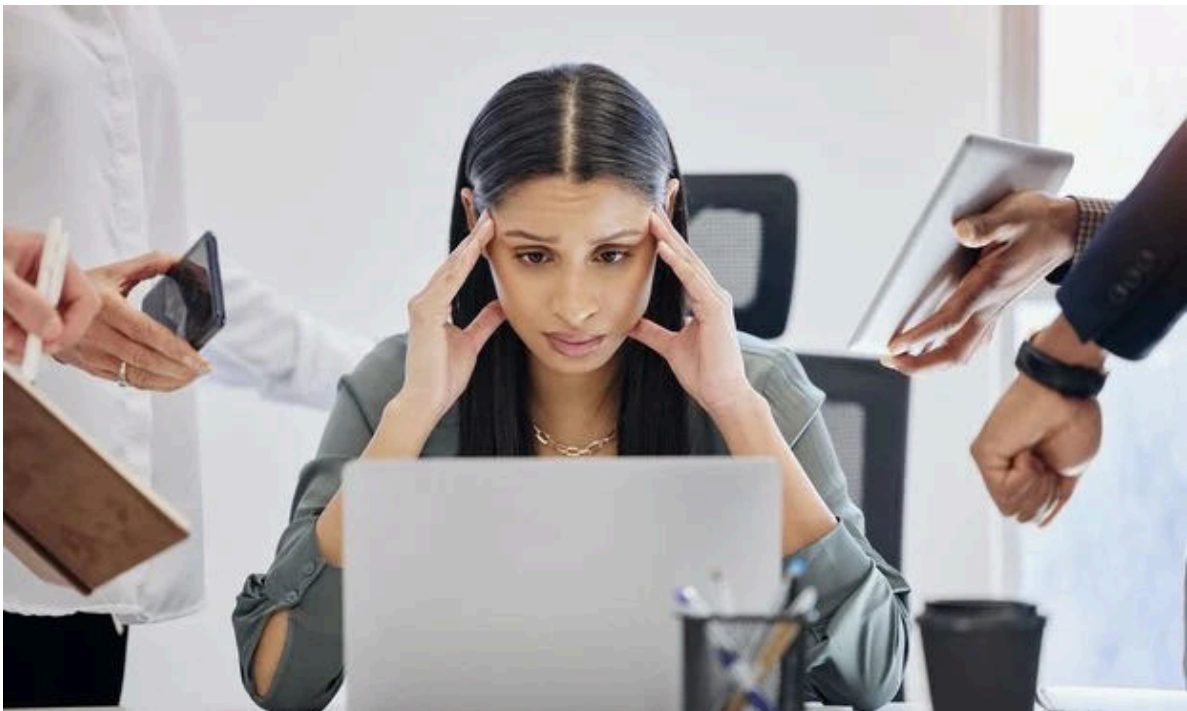
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Best Practices

Why employers tackling women's health should also address digestive health

It's time we made gut health part of the women's health conversation.

By **Sam Jactel** | March 18, 2024 at 12:18 PM



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Extensive research conducted over the past decade has revealed that gastrointestinal (GI) issues are twice as prevalent than diabetes in the



United States, affecting 1 in 4 adults. Digestive conditions like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), Crohn's Disease, and chronic reflux generate over [\\$136 billion](#) in direct health care costs each year—more than heart disease, mental health, and trauma. GI issues are consistently in the [top 5 of employee-related health care costs](#), according to UnitedHealth Group. Yet employers often overlook GI conditions as they consider their benefit offerings, even though it's likely that a large proportion of their workforce is living and struggling with these conditions.

Living with chronic digestive health conditions can be even more challenging for women. With [75% of women](#) in the U.S. today experiencing daily gastrointestinal symptoms of IBS, Crohn's, or UC, it's time we made gut health part of the women's health conversation.

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Gut health is women's health, and to support women in the workforce, employers must offer comprehensive benefits that adequately cover *all* of the [conditions they may experience, including digestive health](#).

The gender gap in GI conditions

Digestive health and women's health are intertwined. Recent studies by The American College of Gastroenterology (ACG) show that women experience digestive issues like IBS at [two to six times the rate that men do](#), and women with IBS tend to have more trigger foods and worse symptoms than men with the same conditions. This is due to a few critical anatomical and hormonal differences between women and men.

The first is that there are simply more organs in the lower part of the abdomen of most women—the uterus and ovaries—which reside directly in front of the colon. Common issues like uterus fibroids,



which are noncancerous growths, affect [up to 77% of women](#) and can press against the colon, triggering bloating or lower abdominal pain. Another contribution to pain symptoms is the decline of ovarian hormones like estrogen and progesterone. This can lead to visceral hypersensitivity, which is when the normal functioning of one's organs might cause discomfort.

The impact of GI conditions typically worsens for postmenopausal women. A study conducted by the NIH found that [postmenopausal women reported significantly more GI pain and discomfort](#), especially bloating and abdominal swelling, than men. The decreasing amounts of estrogen and progesterone due to menopause can slow down the process of food passing through the GI system. When digestion takes longer, more water is reabsorbed into the bloodstream, leading to constipation, increased gas, and bloating.

Related: [Gut check: Why employers should invest in employee digestive wellness](#)

GI conditions in the workplace

GI conditions can profoundly affect daily life at work, home, and beyond. With women making up [56.8% of the U.S. labor force](#) and GI patients reporting they miss or are less productive at work on average 11 days per month, the impact on employers is hard to understate. Put simply, it's hard to focus when you have a stomach ache.

Employers have focused on women's health offerings, rightly so, but primarily on fertility and menopause. Ignoring GI means employers are missing an enormous chunk of care women need to feel their best. GI health benefits may include covered programs to help employees with GI conditions find relief from dietary changes and mindfulness practices.

GI health benefits need to become as common as nap pods, gym memberships, and spaces for lactating mothers. With many women in today's workplace, it's not only right to offer GI health benefits—it's necessary.



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