

Administrator

Important news and updates from your benefits professionals

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Trends In Today's World

Slightly More Births

Data from the federal government showed that more than 3.6 million babies were born in the U.S. in 2024, just one percent more than the record low rate reported in 2023. According to the CDC National Center for Health Statistics, the trend of women giving birth to children in their 30's and early 40's has continued. While the share of babies born to White mothers fell to 49%, Hispanic and Asian women were the only groups to experience an increase. Hispanic mothers accounted for 27% of U.S. births while the fertility rate for Black women declined by 4%, the largest year-over-year decrease ever reported.

Pay at the Pharmacy

At a recent gathering of the American Pharmacists Association, members pushed to seek reimbursement for providing services including flu shots and testing for viruses such as COVID and Strep throat. Using specific billing codes, pharmacists in Arkansas and Michigan are able to obtain reimbursement for these services to members of government and health insurance plans. They hope to extend billing practices to self-funded health plans as well.

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Self-Funding on the Rise

There can only be one reason why the health insurance segment of the Third Party Administrator (TPA) market is experiencing annual growth around 10%. It's because products such as 90 Degree Benefits CareConnect, RightTurnRx and Access2day help members of self-funded health plans enjoy quality care at affordable costs.

Trends Fueling the Growth

Annual premium increases are just one factor causing plan sponsors to explore other funding options. Experts say an increasing presence of chronic conditions has fueled a need for greater operating efficiency and cost transparency. While access to health claims data is often very limited in a fully insured environment, 90 Degree Benefits provides self-funded health plans with data to analyze spending trends and customize benefits as needed.

In addition to avoiding state premium taxes, typically between 2% and 3% of premiums, self-funded plans also offer the potential for savings. When actual claims are below anticipated levels, the unused claim funds are retained by the employer.

Increased Control and Flexibility

Research from the Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) shows that nearly 75% of employers of more than 500 are self-funding their health benefits. Brokers and stop loss carriers say there's plenty of interest among smaller employers as well. Available statistics show that close to 40% of organizations with 100 to 500 employees and about 20% with employee populations under 100 are currently using some form of self-funding. As our workforce becomes more



dynamic, the need for plan design flexibility becomes greater. While self-funded plans assume some risks that insured plans avoid, stop loss coverage and prudent cost management strategies from 90 Degree Benefits protect against potential downsides. Hybrid models known as level funding enable smaller groups with as few as 2 employees to manage risk while enjoying a predictable fixed premium and the potential for savings when claims are lower than expected.

AI Currently at Work

90 Degree Benefits is currently testing AI virtual assistants to provide 24/7 responses to member inquiries. Healthcare providers are using AI to record patient encounters and manage some of the administrative burden associated with billing and related patient correspondence. As major innovations in technology continue, employers and covered members will benefit from ongoing advances in enrollment, member communication, claims administration, regulatory compliance, fraud detection and more.

Leading organizations have long reaped the benefits self-funding provides for plan flexibility and control. Don't miss out on this competitive edge! Contact 90 Degree Benefits and let our team find the right solution for you.



Should Health Plans Have a User's Manual?

Even the highest quality health plan will be underutilized if employees aren't aware of their benefits or how to access them. And while health benefits can confuse anyone, the right combination of education, communication and service can improve utilization and employee morale.

Embrace Technology

Thanks to mobile devices and advancements in AI, communicating in a medium people are comfortable with is easier than ever. AI chatbots added to discussion platforms can answer questions in an instant. Use of a mobile app or online portal gives members one source for information on what benefits are available and how to make the most of them.

Care Coordination Just a Call Away

As a care concierge program, CareConnect from 90 Degree Benefits enables members to call one central phone number and speak with a Care Coordinator. This person will provide prompt answers to questions about benefits, healthcare providers, potential procedures, cost, quality and more. It's a personal touch that benefits everyone.

Think Long Term

With tools like these in place, education and communication will continue to improve. Employees will become more aware of their benefits and better able to use them to their advantage. Over time, utilization will increase along with member wellbeing and satisfaction.

President Moves to Slash Drug Costs



In May, President Trump signed an Executive Order directing drugmakers to sell medicines in the U.S. at prices similar to those offered in other comparably developed countries. The order gives HHS 30 days to develop and communicate goals on price reductions or develop a plan to impose most favored nation pricing. In addition, the order instructs the FDA to search for ways to import lower-cost drugs from other countries including Canada.

The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhrMA) applauded certain aspects of the order, saying that Americans should not foot the bill for global innovation. In contrast, Pharmacy and biotech companies cautioned that the U.S. should not look to other countries to determine pricing here.

No Shortage of Laws

Depending on the funding mechanism involved, employer-sponsored health plans can be governed by as many as 47 federal laws. At least 42 federal laws apply to self-funded health plans. Federal requirements do not apply uniformly to all types of health plans.

Federal laws are in place to monitor every aspect of a health plan, from obtaining and keeping coverage to premiums, covered benefits, cost-sharing and interactions with providers. While small group plans must cover all essential health benefits required by the Affordable Care Act (ACA), self-funded plans and insured large group plans are not subject to this requirement.

Hope on the Horizon

The new administration is working to make it easier for health plans and providers to operate by easing ACA reporting requirements for small businesses and forming an Anticompetitive Regulations Task Force. That said, government interventions take time. However, you don't have to wait for tomorrow. 90 Degree Benefits currently empowers employers to confidently navigate complex legal challenges, including the No Surprises Act, ensuring compliance and peace of mind.

Trends continued

Helping Gig Workers

90 Degree Benefits is excited about new options designed to meet the needs of part-time employees, gig workers and 1099 contractors who have previously found themselves on the outside looking in when it comes to health benefits. While not insurance, some products offer access to unlimited virtual care, cash pricing on medical services and discounts on prescription drugs and hospital treatment without the hassle of provider networks.

More Runners, Less Risk

According to a JAMA cardiology study, the risk of dying from cardiac arrest during a marathon or half-marathon in the U.S. has decreased by half. The study compared data from 29 million runners who participated in these races between 2010 and 2023 to those who competed during the 10-year period of 2000-2009. 176 cardiac arrests occurred among the more than 29 million runners who finished U.S. long distance races.

Wellness in the Air

While airport lounges have offered food, beverages and a comfortable atmosphere to weary travelers, many are going the extra mile with hand-held massage guns, full-body massage chairs and even air compression boots that pulsate to increase blood circulation and ease soreness from long flights. Some even offer 30-minute facials and nap rooms with special lighting for the sleep deprived or those hoping to fool their body and sleep in preparation for a late-night arrival.

Can GLP-1s Really Lower Medical Costs?



There's no doubt that weight loss drugs like Mounjaro, Ozempic and Wegovy have helped drive health plan costs higher in the past two years. In fact, studies show that the cost of these drugs has driven employer spending at a quicker pace than even the costly specialty drugs used to treat cancers and autoimmune conditions such as diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis. But a new study of 139,000 U.S. workers is showing promise.

After tracking claims data from 2022 to 2024, an Aon study has shown that while GLP-1 patients incurred higher medical costs during their first year on the drugs, the number of claims related to major cardiovascular issues, osteoporosis and pneumonias began to fall early in the second year. By the end of the second year, observers say the medical cost trend for patients taking the drugs slowed by about 7%, with the biggest contributor being a significant reduction in the number of heart attacks and strokes – cardiac events linked to obesity. We will keep a watchful eye on this and all available data as we continue to help employers manage the risks and costs associated with the use of these drugs and other growing trends.

Conditions Driving Costs Higher

Even though claims related to diabetes, maternity, mental health and gastroenterology/digestive issues are shown as significant cost drivers, a report from the Business Group on Health identifies cancer, musculoskeletal (MSK) issues and cardiovascular conditions as the three leading cost drivers facing large employers.

While hip and knee replacement procedures impact productivity because of the recovery time involved, the American Cancer Society cautions that the rate of diagnosis for many common forms of cancer is rising for Americans under the age of 65. Employers are advised to encourage the use of proactive cancer screening services as a way to identify at-risk employees and promote early detection. With the CDC consistently noting that 6 in 10 U.S. adults have at least one chronic illness, measures such as these take on added significance.

Benefits on the Horizon

As our nation's workforce continues to change, employers must look for creative ways to enhance the health and wellbeing of their employee population. Here are just a few areas to consider as you begin to look ahead to 2026.

Supporting Women's Health –

Menopausal women, typically those in their 50's, account for almost 30% of our total labor force. Keeping in mind that the average age of a female CEO is 52, it's likely that many women experiencing symptoms of menopause are in management or tenured positions. Well over \$20 billion in medical expenses paid by employers are attributed to menopause, not to mention an estimated \$1.8 billion in lost time annually.

While the response is not all-encompassing, it is growing. According to consultant Mercer, 15% of organizations with over 500 employees offered menopause benefits in 2023, up from just 4% a year earlier. A growing number of employers are responding with Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), behavioral healthcare counseling and low or no copay access to prescription drugs for hormone support and relief of hot flashes or night sweats.

Whether you're considering added coverage, education or workplace accommodations that make menopausal women more comfortable, developing a strategy will let employees know they are understood, appreciated and valued throughout every stage of their work life.

Addressing Mental Health –

A 2024 Businessolver survey showed that while 90% of employees rated having mental health benefits as very important, just 35% reported having access to them. While many small and mid-sized businesses lack mental health coverage, many are taking steps to address a growing need. Some of the steps being taken include:

- **Flexible work schedules** – While many recognized companies are mandating a return to the office, some are remaining flexible by formalizing policies that allow other work locations along with four-day or other non-standard workweeks.

- **Mental health days** – Recognizing that a multi-generational workforce places a very high value on work-life balance, some employers are designating certain days that employees can take off to rest or rejuvenate.

- **Financial education** – Few things in life contribute more to stress and anxiety than money problems, especially for young people with growing responsibilities. While some offer one-on-one coaching, taking time to help an employee choose the health plan best suited to their financial situation can be a real stress reliever.

- **Creative thinking** – If your organization is like many, a majority of your workers may value work-life balance over money. Maybe a survey will uncover a few affordable ways to generate greater engagement, professional development and overall wellbeing.

Did You Know? New Ideas for Healthy Consumers

Obsessing with Protein

As weight-loss drugs have become crazy popular, so has protein as a way of offsetting lost muscle mass. From beverages to snack bars, Americans seem to be on a mission to force as much protein as possible into their daily diets. Even though most Americans already consume the recommended 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight daily (about 54 grams for a person weighing 150 pounds), food manufacturers introduced 97 new products containing protein in their name – last year alone.

Personal trainers and nutritionists remind clients that keeping plenty of protein in your diet doesn't require buying costly protein-branded snacks. Healthy foods like an 8-ounce chicken breast or two eggs and a cup of plain nonfat Greek yogurt and nuts will do just fine. And while it may not sound attractive to weightlifters and body builders, more Americans could benefit by adding more fiber to their diet than protein water, protein chips or protein ice cream.

Tracking While You Eat



Rather than relying on charts or a mobile app, researchers in Canada are using AI to analyze the food we consume one bite at a time. Instead of using a smartphone to photograph your entrée or scan a barcode from food packaging, you will use a camera positioned on your table to record yourself eating. The technology can decompose the food you consume, assessing each spoonful as it moves from your dish to your mouth.

At this point in the development, tablespoons are being used because the depth and angle of the utensil allows for better image capture. While it is only possible to measure the size of the portion now, researchers are collaborating with Purdue University to assemble a 3-D data set on the weight and nutritional values contained in 637 frequently consumed foods. Together, the teams expect to be using other utensils and analyzing calories and nutritional content within a few months.

Rethinking Screen Use



Tests performed within the last 10 years have shown that teens who watch videos or play games before bed have little trouble falling or staying asleep. In fact, one

study performed by a sleep-tracking company showed that regardless of brightness levels, teens needed only 3 minutes more to fall asleep. Other studies involving iPhone usage by young adults have also revealed little difference in how long it took people to fall asleep and how long they slept.

Regardless of the outcomes of blue light emissions, The National Sleep Foundation and many sleep medicine specialists recommend turning off screens at least one hour before bedtime. Other recommendations include use of an alarm as a bedtime reminder, turning phone notifications off during the night and getting as much natural light during the day as possible. Sunlight has a far more powerful effect on sleep cycles than any amount of blue light obtained in the evening.

Note: This newsletter is not intended as a substitute for personal medical or employee benefits advice. Please consult your physician before making decisions that may impact your personal health. Talk to your benefits administrator before implementing strategies that may impact your organization's employee benefit objectives.



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Let's Talk 