



MATERNAL MORTALITY AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

NWA'S MISSION

The National WIC Association (NWA) is the nonprofit voice of the 12,000 public health nutrition service provider agencies who serve nearly 6.9 million mothers, babies, and young children. NWA provides education, guidance, and support to WIC staff and drives innovation and advocacy to strengthen WIC as we work toward a nation of healthier families.



MATERNAL MORTALITY

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) utilize the World Health Organization's definition of maternal mortality—the death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and the site of the pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management, but not from accidental or incidental causes.¹

Another important term to know about the pregnancy and postpartum period is “pregnancy-related death.” The CDC's Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System (PMSS) defines this as a death during or within one year of the end of the pregnancy from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy.^{2,3} More than 80% of pregnancy-related deaths are preventable if there was at least some chance that death could have been avoided with reasonable changes to

patient, family, provider, facility, system, and/or community factors.⁴

The United States (U.S.) continues to have the highest rate of maternal deaths of any high-income nation, despite a decline since the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, there were 22 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births, more than double and sometimes triple the rate for most other high-income nations.⁵

Factors contributing to maternal mortality include social determinants of health, lack of prenatal care in rural areas and maternity care deserts, and racial/ethnic discrimination. To learn more about maternal mortality and its contributing factors, read NWA's Infant and Maternal Mortality Task Force's handout, *WIC's Role in Addressing Maternal Mortality*.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) explains that “individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”⁶ Some examples of experiences that may be traumatic include: physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, childhood neglect, poverty, racism, discrimination, and oppression, violence in the community, war, or terrorism, sudden, unexplained separation from loved ones, or living with a family member with mental health or substance use disorder.⁷



Various forms of trauma can have a major impact on maternal mortality. These forms of trauma include intergenerational trauma, historical trauma, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Intergenerational Trauma – the transmission of trauma or its legacy, in the form of a psychological consequence of an injury or attack, poverty, and so forth, from the generation experiencing the trauma to subsequent generations.⁸

Historical Trauma – multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group. It is related to major events that oppressed a particular group of people because of their status as oppressed, such as colonialism and slavery, forced migration, and the violent colonization of indigenous peoples.⁹ Historical trauma is intergenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural group that has a history of being systematically oppressed.¹⁰

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years).¹¹ These traumatic events can include violence, abuse, and growing up in a family with mental health or substance use problems.¹² ACEs can have lasting effects on a person’s health and well-being.

Three trauma-related definitions that are important to understand how trauma affects health and how protective factors can help:¹³

- Toxic Stress – strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity that stimulates the body’s natural protections against stress and can have a long-term negative impact on neurobiology, psychology, and physical health.
- Allostatic Load – wear-and-tear on the body from toxic stress that can lead to poor health and health risk behaviors.
- Protective Factors – social conditions or personal attributes that help lessen the risks of trauma for an individual, family, or community.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE (TIC)

A trauma-informed approach calls for a change in organizational culture, where an emphasis is placed on understanding, respecting, and appropriately responding to the effects of trauma at all levels. This shift also requires organizations to gain a complete picture of a participant's life situation—past and present—to provide effective services with a healing orientation. It is of extreme importance that environments in the health care system are created to foster trust and support for mothers and families to ultimately reduce maternal mortality rates. TIC is also about building a relationship with the participant, a skill in which many WIC staff are strong.

TIC is a framework that considers the effect that past trauma can have on current behavior and the ability to cope. It can help minimize re-traumatization during health care encounters. When meeting with mothers and caregivers who have experienced trauma, it is important to understand the entire picture of their emotional, psychological, and physical health. To establish a supportive environment that encourages open communication and trust, it is essential to consistently acknowledge and respect the unique experiences and boundaries of each mother. Overall, creating an empowering, safe space to help address concerns can work to reduce the rate of maternal mortality.

Trauma-informed care seeks to:¹⁴

- Realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand paths for recovery.
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in patients, families, and staff;
- Integrate knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and
- Actively avoid re-traumatization.

TIC understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery rather than practices and services that may inadvertently re-traumatize.¹⁵

Additionally, an organization that provides trauma-informed care will create a safe, caring, and inclusive environments for all, patients and staff. Trauma-informed care can also help reduce the burnout of staff and improve staff wellness.¹⁶



HOW WIC ADDRESSES MATERNAL MORTALITY THROUGH A TIC LENS

WIC not only offers nutritional and breastfeeding support but also provides referrals to health and social services and is a beacon for community support. As trusted providers of care for WIC participants, staff play a vital role in ensuring participants feel valued, safe, and respected when discussing various aspects of their lives. The importance of affirming small positive behavior changes is imperative for building a trusting relationship with participants, also known as meeting participants where they're at.

For example, if a mom is smoking marijuana but has reduced it to once a week, acknowledging the steps taken to reduce smoking versus judging or shaming is important. TIC is an opportunity for staff to provide compassionate care rather than reopening or causing more trauma through negative responses. Therefore, understanding how individuals deal with trauma is an invaluable tool. With that being said, WIC staff already have limited time to meet with program participants and thus, it's important to acknowledge that staff can provide support over multiple appointments to allow for proper documentation of the issue and facilitate effective continuity of care. It's also important to remember that not everyone deals with trauma the same way. In other words, one individual may turn to substance misuse whereas another may struggle with disordered eating while someone else struggles with depression.

For WIC staff, it's important to recognize the need for, and provide, appropriate referrals. The following tips can be used to help assess referral needs for WIC participants:

- Utilize WIC screening tools such as questions about substance use during the certification appointment.
- Discuss harmful substances and their effects on women and baby's health.
- Provide printed education materials.
- Foster trust by using the principles of TIC, such as explaining procedures, offering options, and establishing networks of peer support (e.g., WIC Peer Counselors)¹⁷.
- Refer participants for treatment or counseling for substance use or prescription medication misuse¹⁸ when needed.
- Use resources from trusted sources. These resources are a great start:
 - [Lactation and Substance Use Guidance for Health Care Professionals](#)
 - [Key Resources and Recommended Reading for Information on Drugs during Lactation](#)
 - [WIC Substance Use Prevention Guide | WIC Works Resource System \(usda.gov\)](#)
 - [Substance Use Screening Tools | WIC Works Resource System \(usda.gov\)](#)

¹ How NCHS Measures Maternal Deaths, 2020. Natl. Cent. Health Stat.

² Guaja, M., Gumas, E., Mashitha, R., Zephyrin, L., 2024. Insights into the U.S Maternal Mortality Crisis: An International Comparison. Common. Fund.

³ Data from the Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System | Maternal Mortality Prevention | CDC

⁴ Preventing Pregnancy-Related Deaths | Maternal Mortality Prevention | CDC

⁵ Guaja, M., Gumas, E., Mashitha, R., Zephyrin, L., 2024. Insights into the U.S Maternal Mortality Crisis: An International Comparison. Common. Fund.

⁶ Trauma, 2021. TRAUMAINFORMED.

⁷ Understanding the Effects of Trauma on Health, 2019. Cent. Health Care Strategies.

⁸ Intergenerational Trauma, 2023. Am. Psychol. Assoc.

⁹ Trauma, 2014. Adm. Child. Fam.

¹⁰ Trauma, 2014. Adm. Child. Fam.

¹¹ About Adverse Childhood Experiences, 2024. Cent. Disease Control Prev.

¹² Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) | VitalSigns | CDC

¹³ Understanding the Effects of Trauma on Health. The Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc.

¹⁴ What is Trauma-informed care? 2021. Trauma-Inf. Care Implementation Resour. Cent.

¹⁵ What is Trauma-informed Care, 2023. Univ. Buffalo.

¹⁶ What is Trauma-Informed Care? - Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center. The Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc.

¹⁷ What is Trauma Informed Care? 2025. Natl. Cent. for Rel. Health & Trauma-Informed Care.

¹⁸ Your Words Matter – Language Showing Compassion and Care for Women, Infants, Families, and Communities Impacted by Substance Use Disorder, 2021. Natl. Inst. Drug Abuse.