

Healthy Pregnancy and Healthy Children: Opportunities and Challenges for Employers

AOL's WellBaby Program: An Employer Case Study

Company Background

AOL, a large media company located just outside of Washington, DC, takes a proactive approach to controlling pregnancy-related healthcare costs by offering all employees and their families access to a comprehensive well-baby program.

AOL recognizes that healthy mothers and babies result from good preventive care that begins before conception and extends into early childhood.

AOL's WellBaby Program provides preconception, healthy pregnancy, and lactation programs that promote optimal health behaviors through awareness, education, counseling, and incentives. This program has helped AOL reduce or control its pregnancy-related health costs in a number of key areas.

Initial Impetus

AOL created the company's WellBaby Program out of concern for the health and well-being of their beneficiaries. An analysis of healthcare cost data identified the need to reduce high-risk pregnancies and sick-baby claims. AOL recognized that early intervention and health promoting activities (e.g., new parent education, breastfeeding education) have the ability to improve health and reduce healthcare costs.

AOL's Pregnancy-Related Cost Concerns

- Costs associated with preterm birth.
- Costs associated with low-birthweight babies.
- Absenteeism due to disability and complications.
- Job retention.
- Sick-baby care in the first year of life.

Business Case

Containing high healthcare costs, minimizing absenteeism due to pregnancy complications and episodic childhood illness, and retaining employees following the birth of a child drive the business case for AOL's WellBaby Program. The program's return on investment (ROI) is realized from both direct and indirect costs-savings.

Direct Cost-Savings:

- Reduced utilization of high-cost pregnancy care.
- Fewer neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) days: AOL saved an estimated \$782,584 in NICU costs in 2005.
- Shorter hospital stays for mother and baby.
- Fewer sick-baby visits to the pediatrician.
- Fewer pregnancy-related short-term disability claims.

Indirect Cost-Savings:

- Reduced absenteeism and presenteeism.
- Improved retention (reduced turnover).
- Increased breastfeeding rate and duration.

History

AOL's WellBaby Program was launched in 2003 when AOL identified the need for an intensive health promotion program for expectant mothers. Prior to 2003, AOL provided contracted telephonic counseling and health education services for pregnant women, and sponsored a few classes per year for expectant and lactating mothers, usually off-site. In 2003, the company established a working relationship with Inova HealthSource of the Inova Health System. Inova staff agreed to provide on-site programming to give the WellBaby Program a more visible presence. AOL was able to leverage the Inova staff's institutional knowledge, understanding of company culture, and existing relationships with employees. Together, AOL and Inova substantially revised the existing program to include a higher level of personal interaction, additional classes and content areas, expanded counseling services, and greater availability.

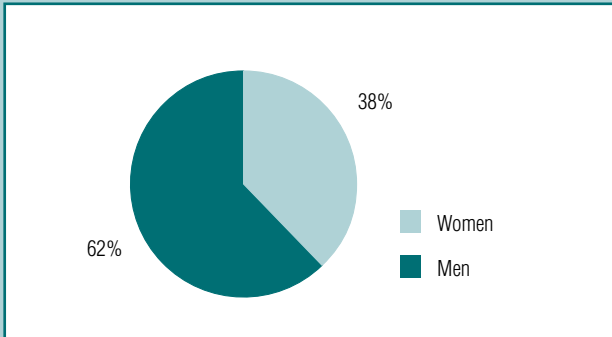
AOL human resource staff developed the WellBaby Program over a 3-month period with the following goals in mind:

- Lower the healthcare costs related to pregnancy and childbirth.
- Focus on preconception, prenatal, pregnancy, and lactation issues facing employees and their partners.
- Increase timely, appropriate, proactive interventions to decrease costly utilization.
- Increase employee productivity by decreasing absenteeism and impairment.
- Provide incentives for participants to engage in health promoting activities.

Maternal Health at AOL: A Snapshot

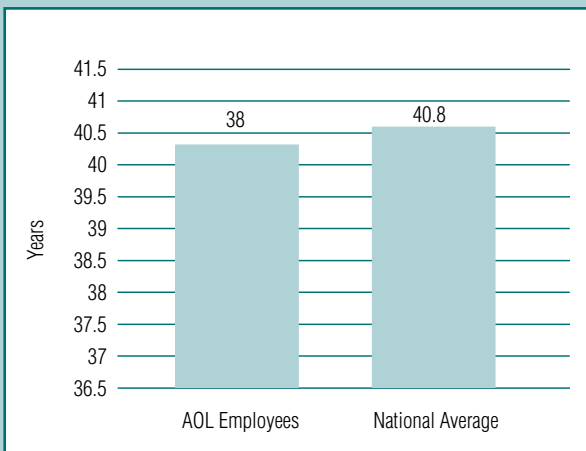
Large female population:

38% of benefit-eligible employees at AOL are women.



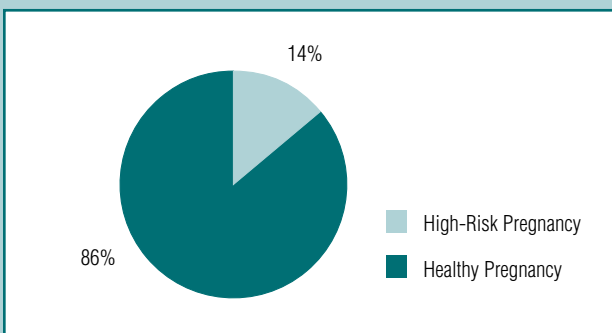
Young population:

The average AOL employee is 38 years old; spouses are a few years younger.



Growing average family size: The average family size grew by 2.5% in 2006, an upward trend consistent with prior years.

Many high-risk pregnancies: 86% of program participants are categorized as high-risk.



Due to the availability of an infertility benefit, which allows older women and women with preexisting health problems to become pregnant, AOL has a higher-than-average rate of high-risk pregnancies.

Description of the Program

AOL's WellBaby program includes three components: a preconception program, a pregnancy program, and a lactation program. Each program addresses the specific health issues and topics relevant to having a *healthy* baby.

The WellBaby Program provides a high-touch, high-tech approach to pregnancy health promotion.

Preconception Program

AOL's preconception program is intended for couples planning a pregnancy, as well as those planning to undergo infertility treatment. A care manager assigned to the woman and her partner assesses the woman's health history and makes individual recommendations and referrals. As a part of the preconception program, AOL provides a monthly newsletter, free and confidential webinars on key issues, and private consultations on the following topics:

- The science of getting pregnant.
- Preconception planning.
- Pregnancy.
- Nutrition and healthy lifestyle choices.
- Infertility treatment.
- Financial and emotional considerations.

Pregnancy Program

The pregnancy program is designed to educate and support pregnant employees, beneficiaries, and non-beneficiary dependants and their families. This program supports improved birth outcomes for the AOL family by combining education on health benefit offerings with health screenings, and guidance on preventive care.

Care managers provide support to improve the adoption of healthy behaviors, and increase prenatal and postpartum treatment compliance. They also work to improve the comprehension and retention of health information provided by the program and the woman's personal physician. For example, pregnant women receive same day or next-day phone calls if the care manager is aware of a problem (e.g., missed appointment, test result indicating a problem with the fetus). WellBaby staff assess the problem, and if needed, make sure the participant contacts her physician for additional information. Care managers immediately answer any questions about the care or treatment recommended by the woman's physician. In some cases (and with the woman's permission), the care manager schedules appointments and contacts her healthcare provider to make sure the woman gets necessary follow-up care.

Lactation Program

The lactation program assists employees and their infants in breastfeeding as long as possible. Women are enrolled in the program for as long as they breastfeed, and participation often continues through an infant's first year of life. The program provides worksite lactation benefits, comprehensive on- and off-site lactation counseling, group lactation classes, and tailored support.

Worksite lactation benefits include lactation rooms in every building on the AOL campus, two types of hospital-grade breast pumps in each room, and flexible break times to pump throughout the workday. Participants are also eligible to receive in-person consultations on breastfeeding and breastfeeding techniques in their homes or at the worksite.

Health education and support messages on breastfeeding are sent through Instant Messenger (AIM), emails, telephone calls, and the monthly WellBaby newsletter. In addition to breastfeeding support, the education messages include information on incorporating solid food into a baby's diet, and weaning the baby from breast milk. Helpful tips are also provided on working while breastfeeding.

Outline of WellBaby Program Components

Registration

- A WellBaby Program staff member gathers basic information from the beneficiary:
 - Name
 - Email
 - Phone number--both home and work
- A welcome email and overview of the program is sent to the participant.
- An initial welcome phone call is placed and the participant is screened for pregnancy risk factors.

Tailored Support and Health Education

- A care manager contacts each participant.
- Referrals to "physicians/centers-of-excellence" are provided on an as needed basis:
 - Physicians with extensive cultural knowledge for various groups.
 - Fertility centers with responsible implantation practices.
 - Maternal-fetal specialists for participants with a high-risk assessment.
- A monthly newsletter that includes health education information on a variety of pregnancy-related topics is sent to all participants; materials are also available at an on-site office.
 - Information from the March of Dimes and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
 - Materials developed specifically for participants by program staff.
- Participants are invited to attended education baby classes in-person, by conference call, or in webinar format on preconception, prenatal, postpartum/new baby care, and a new parents group.

Follow-Up

- Care managers contact each participant immediately after the birth of their child:
 - In hospital for participants delivering at local hospitals.
 - Visits to high-risk perinatal/ NICU babies at local hospitals.
 - Phone call for patients delivering at other area hospitals.
 - Participants are encouraged to contact their care manager whenever needed.
- Care managers contact each participant 2 months after the delivery of their child. At this time, care managers:
 - Screen for postpartum depression.
 - Provide lactation support.
 - Assess treatment compliance.
 - Discuss the participant's postpartum visit and the importance of follow-up treatment for conditions identified during pregnancy.
 - Provide advice on family planning.

Lactation Support

- A lactation room is provided in every building and includes two types of breast pumps.
- Lactation classes are available.
- Certified lactation consultants are available to assist participants on- or off-site.

Program Incentives

- Participants earn points for participation in activities. Points can purchase gift cards at baby stores or a high-quality breast pump for use at home.

Program Outreach

- Advertisements for WellBaby classes are posted and placed on a company-wide schedule of events.
- Advertisements are also sent out via email.
- Instant Messenger (AIM) and the telephone are used for direct communication with participants.
- Benefits packet fliers distributed during open enrollment include WellBaby program information.

Program Achievements

AOL analyzes the following data points annually in order to assess the achievements of the WellBaby program:

- Number of women enrolled in the program.
- Number of prenatal visits.
- Number of prenatal prescriptions filled.
- Number of cesarean deliveries.
- Number of preterm births.
- Number of NICU days.
- Breastfeeding rate.
- Utilization of pregnancy-related healthcare services.

Since 2003, the program has succeeded in:

- Increasing program enrollment and re-enrollment for subsequent pregnancies.
- Reducing the number of premature births.
- Reducing the number of low-birthweight babies.
- Reducing child morbidity.
- Increasing the use of prenatal care.
- Increasing the fill/re-fill rate of prenatal prescriptions.
- Increasing the breastfeeding rate. In 2005, 80% of participants breastfed; in 2006 84% breastfed.

Lessons Learned

AOL continually revises its WellBaby program to meet the needs of participants. Since the program's re-design in 2003, AOL has learned the following key lessons:

- *Be visible.* Let beneficiaries know the program is available.
- *Utilize independent contractors.* Anticipate privacy concerns and provide an extra layer between the employee and company management.
- *Follow-up.* Circle back with participants to clarify recommended treatment and increase treatment compliance.
- *Value high-touch care.* Both male and female employees respond well to in-person and personalized communication. Participants appreciate communication customized to their specific needs.
- *Enlist key players* in program development activities, such as:
 - Pregnant and lactating employees.
 - Spouses and family members of pregnant women.
 - WellBaby staff.
 - Benefits staff.
 - Employee assistance program (EAP) staff.
 - Local physicians, nurses, and counselors.
 - Local hospitals.
 - Disability managers.

Program Success

The success of the WellBaby program is based on the close relationships between the WellBaby coach, individual care managers, and program participants.

Care managers provide individualized care and tailor the program to each participant's unique needs. Through regular, proactive contact, the care manager continually assesses the woman's needs, addresses challenges, and encourages healthy behaviors. Additionally, the care manager assists with problem-solving as issues arise. This in-depth interaction ensures participant engagement. AOL's visible commitment to the program and to the health of all beneficiaries further promotes engagement.

Tips for Overcoming Barriers to Success

AOL's WellBaby program has been tremendously successful, but it did face challenges. Below is a list of these challenges and the solutions AOL developed to ensure continued program success.

Language/Cultural Challenges: Pregnant women may not understand prenatal care recommendations because they do not speak English.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Distribute health literature from reliable sources in multiple languages.• Select program providers with cultural understanding and experience.• Employ providers with foreign language competencies.• Maintain a backup translator list.
Privacy Concerns: Pregnant women may not use counseling or education services because they fear pregnancy discrimination from their employer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use contractors to build an extra layer between employee and management for pregnancy issues.• Advise participants of HIPAA compliance.• Create a pregnancy-friendly corporate culture.
Participant Compliance: Pregnant women may not follow care recommendations because they experience barriers to getting the recommended care/treatment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set protocols for contact intervals.• Keep record of recommendations given.• Follow-up the next day after appointments or pregnancy-related events.

Conclusion

AOL's experience shows that providing high-quality education, tailored counseling and support services, and incentives encourages beneficiaries to take a more proactive role in pregnancy and infant health. By promoting and supporting self-care, AOL is able to control direct and indirect costs, and improve the health of the entire AOL family.

Answering the following questions can help your company understand the benefits of investing in pregnancy health.

Key Questions to ask when Considering a Well-Baby Program

- What percent of your company's health claims are pregnancy-related?
- What percent of your company's employee population are women of childbearing-age (women aged 18 to 44 years)?
- How many women of childbearing-age are enrolled in your company's health plans?
- What percent of beneficiaries give birth to low-birthweight babies? Is this number higher than the national average of 8% per year?
- What percent of beneficiaries give birth prematurely? Is this number higher than the national average of 12.5% per year? (Prematurity is defined by the March of Dimes as birth before 37 weeks gestation.)
- What is your retention rate for women following the birth of a child? Is retention following birth a concern to your company?
- Are you seeing high claims for sick-baby care in the first year of life?
- Are sick babies keeping your employees out of work?
- Would a well-baby program attract highly-skilled workers?
- Under what circumstance might a well-baby program add value to your organization?