

# Substance Use Disorders Among Women: What Utahns Need to Know

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

## UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

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Substance use disorders (SUDs) are a significant challenge for women, families, and communities, with far-reaching impacts on individual health, family stability, and community well-being. Women's experiences with substance use are often shaped by unique factors such as opioid use, pregnancy, postpartum transitions, and trauma. Understanding these gender-specific dynamics is critical for developing effective prevention, treatment, and recovery strategies that improve outcomes for Utah women and their families.

### TREATMENT ACCESS

Treatment and recovery services play a critical role in helping women overcome substance use disorders. In 2024, Utah's county-based treatment network served 16,440 individuals, and 37% of whom were women. Most clients were between ages 25 and 44, suggesting that substance use disorders often affect women during key years of employment, caregiving, and family life. Although many women receive care through Utah's public treatment system, others face barriers such as cost, childcare, transportation, stigma, and limited service availability. These challenges highlight the need for accessible treatment and recovery services tailored to women's experiences and continued investment in treatment access statewide.

### OPIOID IMPACT

Opioids remain a defining feature of women's substance use experiences in Utah. In 2024, 32.9% of women entering public treatment programs identified opioids as their primary substance, compared to 27% of men, making opioids the leading substance among women in treatment. Women are more likely than men to be prescribed opioids and to develop opioid addiction, creating unique risks and challenges. Ongoing prescription opioid misuse and rising fentanyl-related overdose risks underscore the need for targeted support for Utah women.

### WHY THIS MATTERS

"Researchers and practitioners need to continue the dialogue on women's substance use in order to expand knowledge, challenge prejudices, and learn to support women in a way that is specific to their needs. Women are often more affected by substance use than men and more affected negatively by others' use. They commonly experience multiple types of disadvantage and trauma, including violence and abuse, poverty, and mental ill-health."

*Frontiers in Psychiatry Editorial  
Women and Substance Use: Specific  
Needs and Experiences*

### REGIONAL PATTERNS

Substance use trends vary considerably across Utah's different regions. Local data show that alcohol, methamphetamine, and heroin emerge as the dominant substances in different communities, illustrating that substance use challenges are not uniform across the state. To address these regional differences, local leaders and providers should tailor prevention, treatment, and recovery strategies to the specific substances and populations most affected in their areas. Understanding local trends can also help communities better allocate resources and identify emerging concerns before they become larger public health challenges.

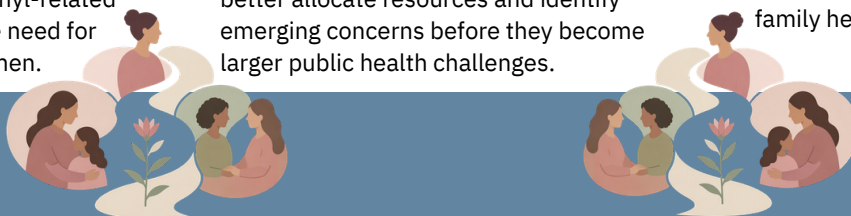
### SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS:

- affect thousands of Utah women.
- are driven by opioid misuse.
- create risks during pregnancy.
- are linked to personal trauma.

### MATERNAL RISKS

Substance use disorders create significant risks during pregnancy for both mothers and infants. In 2024, 247 women were pregnant when admitted to Utah's public substance use treatment programs, and 29% were experiencing homelessness. These overlapping challenges can make it more difficult to access and engage in care. Research has also found that nearly 1 in 10 infants may be exposed to substances prenatally, with opioid exposure accounting for the majority of cases. Expanding access to treatment, healthcare services, housing support, and early intervention resources can improve outcomes for mothers and children.

The risks associated with substance use often persist and, in some cases, increase after childbirth. Nearly 90% of pregnancy-related deaths occur during the postpartum period, and about 80% are linked to opioid use. Loss of regular medical care, insurance changes, postpartum mental health challenges, caregiving demands, and reduced drug tolerance following periods of abstinence can heighten the risk of relapse and overdose. Strengthening integrated maternal, behavioral health, and recovery services during the postpartum period can help women stay connected to treatment, reduce preventable deaths, and support family health and well-being.



## TRAUMA CONNECTIONS

Research consistently links trauma and adverse childhood experiences to an increased likelihood of developing substance use disorders. Utah women experience elevated rates of child sexual abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of victimization that may contribute to long-term behavioral health challenges. As a result, trauma-informed prevention, treatment, and recovery approaches are critical for addressing the root causes of substance use and supporting lasting healing.

## OVERDOSE THREATS

Drug overdoses remain a serious public health concern in Utah, with 591 overdose deaths reported in 2024, an average of about 49 deaths per month. Fentanyl was involved in 43% of overdose fatalities, and its growing presence continues to increase risks across the state. Although women experience lower overdose mortality rates than men, overdose remains a significant threat to women’s well-being. Expanding access to overdose prevention tools, education, and life-saving interventions is critical to reducing the human and economic costs of overdose deaths.

## BUILDING STRONGER SOLUTIONS

**Women face unique risks and barriers related to substance use disorders.** These challenges extend beyond individual health and affect families, communities, workplaces, and healthcare systems. Women’s experiences are often shaped by factors such as opioid exposure, pregnancy, postpartum health, trauma, and access to treatment. As Utah continues to address substance misuse, these unique circumstances should remain a key consideration in prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts.

**Greater investment in gender-responsive services is essential.** Treatment programs should integrate mental health care, trauma-informed practices, maternal health supports, housing assistance, and long-term recovery resources that affect women’s lived experiences. Expanding access to care during pregnancy and the postpartum period, enhancing overdose prevention efforts, and increasing awareness of available resources can help reduce barriers that often prevent women from seeking treatment.

**Utah can expand its response system to substance use disorders.** Policymakers, healthcare providers, educators, employers, and community organizations can work together to advance prevention efforts, improve treatment accessibility, and expand recovery supports. By addressing the root causes of substance use and investing in evidence-informed solutions, Utah can improve outcomes for women, support families, and create healthier communities across the state.

## HELPING UTAH WOMEN

You can help Utah women experiencing substance use disorders by promoting understanding, reducing stigma, and supporting access to treatment and recovery services. See below for calls to action and resources to address substance use disorders and improve the lives of women, families, and communities.

*Data Source: UWLP Snapshot No. 64 (2025)*

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Learn More:** Explore resources in the UWLP Health Across the Lifespan [Resource Kit](#).
- **Review:** Find goals, perceptions, and community partners on the Health Across the Lifespan Spoke [webpage](#).
- **Get Involved:** Connect to the grassroots initiative, [A Bolder Way Forward](#).
- **Take Action:** Help move the needle and discover additional [Calls to Action](#) for individuals, groups, organizations and communities.



Reach out and have a conversation about opioid use and misuse with your family and friends. Education can help prevent SUDs.



Stop the stigma. Share the knowledge that SUDs are treatable and recovery is possible with support.



Safely manage your pain and prescriptions. Don’t keep pills you don’t need and dispose of them at a secure drop box. [This site](#) can help you find one in your area.

Learn more at [www.utwomen.org](http://www.utwomen.org)

Authors: Brie Sparks & Dr. Susan R. Madsen