

# Invest in Women's Health Research Across the Lifespan

Over the past decade, research funding for chronic health conditions impacting millions of Americans has been decreasing continuously. Women's chronic health conditions, such as pelvic floor disorders (PFDs), receive disproportionately less funding compared to the number of individuals they impact.

■ **Women's health research is woefully underfunded.** Between 2013 and 2023, approximately 8% of National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant funding went to support women's health research; of that, just 2% went to non-obstetric conditions—leaving major gaps for disorders that affect women across the lifespan, particularly after their reproductive years, even though older women are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population.

■ **Even less funding is devoted to conditions that affect aging women.** The limited funding devoted for women's health research is focused on reproductive-aged women, and in general, primarily focused on obstetrical care, while women's health care encompasses the full lifespan. Chronic conditions that worsen with the menopausal transition and non-pregnancy related issues are prevalent in both reproductive-aged and older women, with the latter being the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. A September 2024 search via the NIH RePORTER using the urogynecologic terms "Pelvic Floor Disorders," "Prolapse," and "Incontinence" identified only 33 grants funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in 2024, totaling \$15.8 million. As compared to other conditions, **funding for these aging woman-dominant conditions, such as pelvic floor disorders (PFDs), is not commensurate with the relative disease burden**, despite similarities in scientific merit, scientific opportunity, portfolio balance, and budgetary considerations in grant proposals.

■ **Current research funding levels are inadequate, given the prevalence of urogynecologic disorders.** Urogynecologic disorders, including PFDs, affect 25 million individuals annually. One in four women faces a PFD in their lifetime, and the rate increases with age, with higher prevalence among women over the age of 65. For example, over 50% of women over the age of 65 suffer from incontinence, and one third of postmenopausal women face recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs).

■ **Urogynecologic disorders pose a significant financial to society, in both health care expenses and patient out-of-pocket costs.** Each year, over \$12 billion is spent on stress urinary incontinence alone, with patients paying 70% out-of-pocket for routine care costs for pads, diapers, laundry, and dry cleaning. This funding disparity has led to significant gaps in research that is needed to develop preventive and therapeutic strategies for such conditions which are increasing constantly in our society.

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## HOW CONGRESS CAN HELP

AUGS urges Congress to ensure funding is invested to NIH for women's health research across the lifespan to address the research gaps.

■ **Congress must ensure adequate and increased appropriations levels for NIH, including for the institutes and offices that focus on women's health research:** *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institute on Aging, and Office of Research on Women's Health.

■ **Congress should direct the NIH to allocate women's health research funding to conditions that affect women across the lifespan,** including PFDs such as urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse.