

# Healthy Behaviors:

## Addressing Chronic Disease at Its Roots

Chronic diseases are the nation's leading cause of death, illness, and disability. Over 70 percent of deaths – more than 1.7 million each year – are attributable to chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, obesity, diabetes, and lung disease. More than 90 million Americans live with a chronic disease, with 25 million of them experiencing major limitations in their daily activities due to their condition.

Although the incidence of some chronic diseases is declining, the incidence of others is increasing. Of particular concern is a dramatic increase in the incidence of diabetes. The number of adults diagnosed with diabetes has increased 61 percent since 1991 and is expected to more than double by 2050. Type 2 diabetes – previously considered a disease of adulthood – is increasingly being diagnosed in children and adolescents. Type 2 diabetes is linked in both children and adults to increases in obesity and physical inactivity.

The development and progression of many chronic diseases are linked to unhealthy behaviors, particularly cigarette smoking and use of other tobacco products, poor diet, and lack of regular exercise. A recent study conducted by the Institute of Medicine examined the literature on interventions to modify these unhealthy behaviors. It concluded that separate intervention models are not needed and that, to be effective, behavioral change efforts must focus on three things: first, helping people develop the skills they need to change their behavior; second, providing comprehensive and sustained interventions; and third, ensuring access to social and other supports that help people maintain behavioral changes.

### INFLUENCING THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO CHRONIC DISEASE

Helping people to avoid health-damaging behaviors can prevent or delay the development of chronic disease and help people live longer and healthier lives. Health grantmakers across the country are playing an important role in mobilizing communities, employers, schools, families, and individuals to move toward healthier behaviors.

- **Curbing Tobacco Use** – Tobacco use is responsible for over 400,000 premature deaths in the U.S. each year and is the leading cause of death and disease in this country. Almost 23 percent of adults in the U.S. are smokers and, among high schoolers, over 28 percent report smoking in the past month.

Members of racial and ethnic minority groups are at substantially higher risk of developing and dying from chronic diseases.

- Rates of death from heart disease and stroke were 29 percent higher and 40 percent higher, respectively, among African Americans in 1999 than among whites.
- Deaths from diabetes were also significantly higher for African American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Hispanic populations than for whites.

Eighty percent of adults who smoke started before age 18, making youth a primary target for health grantmakers' tobacco prevention efforts. The American Legacy Foundation, established in 1999 as a result of the Master Settlement Agreement between most states and the tobacco industry, has youth tobacco prevention as a primary focus. In the four years since its inception, the foundation has launched an award-winning national media campaign aimed at preventing youth tobacco use and has also become a national resource for research on risk behaviors in both youth and adults and information on effective tobacco control programs. The foundation also supports a wide range of projects nationwide to help youth stay tobacco-free and help current tobacco users develop the motivation and skills to quit for good. In 2003, the American Legacy Foundation launched a new initiative to increase the number of foundations that fund tobacco control programs in their communities. The *Funders for Tobacco Control Grant Program* will provide matching funds to organizations that fund existing, innovative, or new tobacco control programs, with a special focus on organizations addressing youth tobacco use, second-hand smoke education and policy, and projects targeting rural communities.

Other health grantmakers concerned about youth tobacco use are also supporting prevention and cessation efforts, many through partnerships with schools. In one example, the Moses Cone-Wesley Long Community Health Foundation is sponsoring a comprehensive tobacco education program in a North Carolina school district. Funds from the foundation support outreach and awareness campaigns, an alternative to suspension for students caught using

tobacco on school grounds, and school-based tobacco cessation programs.

Other health grantmakers are supporting tobacco cessation programs for adults. Smokers who quit can cut their risk of heart disease by as much as half just one to two years after quitting and their risk of lung cancer by 30 percent to 50 percent after 10 smoke-free years. To help smokers in its community achieve these benefits, The Wellmark Foundation in Iowa helped a local tobacco cessation coalition move a successful worksite program into the community. The communitywide cessation project targeted adults in their child-rearing years, thereby benefiting two generations: the adult tobacco users and their children, who were no longer exposed to their parents' second-hand smoke.

- ▶ **Encouraging a Healthy Diet** – A healthy diet lowers the risk for many chronic diseases, such as heart disease, some types of cancer, diabetes, and osteoporosis. Although American diets are improving, only about one-fourth of adults and less than one-fifth of children eat the recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables every day.

One way that health grantmakers are reaching seniors, low-income families, and other populations at risk for poor nutrition is by supporting nutrition education at food banks, senior centers, and soup kitchens. The Carlisle Area Health & Wellness Foundation in Pennsylvania provided funding to a local food bank to help it convert its kitchen into a demonstration facility where classes on cooking, canning, freezing, and proper nutrition can be conducted. The foundation also helped support an on-site registered nurse who provides screening, referrals, and education about nutrition and other health issues to families and individuals using the food bank.

Other grantmakers focus on improving access to healthy foods in settings where such foods may be hard to come by. To ensure that low-income city residents have access to healthy, organically grown produce, the Public Welfare Foundation supported a Washington, DC nonprofit organization that brings area farmers, volunteers, and urban communities together to sponsor farmers' markets, nutrition education programs, and community gardens. To help low-income children and families consume a healthier diet, The California Wellness Foundation supported a project that delivered fresh fruits and vegetables to schools, after-school programs, and domestic violence shelters.

- ▶ **Promoting Regular Physical Activity** – Regular exercise can help prevent chronic disease by improving cardiovascular functioning and helping people maintain a healthy weight, among other benefits. Less than half of adults, however, engage in the recommended amount of physical activity (30 minutes a day of moderate activity most days of the week). Among children ages 9-13, 62 percent do not

engage in any organized physical activity during non-school hours, and over one-fifth do not engage in any free-time physical activity.

People who are physically inactive are almost twice as likely to develop heart disease as active people, making inactivity as important a risk factor for heart disease as smoking, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol. Researchers have estimated that if the 88 million Americans over age 15 who are inactive began engaging in regular, moderate activity, annual health care costs could be reduced by as much as \$76.6 billion (in 2000 dollars).

Because walking is a form of exercise readily available to most people, many health grantmakers have supported projects that promote walking for fitness. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has provided support to the National Conference of State Legislatures to identify exemplary state policies that encourage walking and biking to achieve public health benefits. The Connecticut Health Foundation and Paso del Norte Health Foundation in Texas are among the state and local foundations supporting community walking projects and walking trail development.

Some grantmakers are partnering with faith communities to get congregations moving. Welborn Baptist Foundation in Indiana supports the development and operation of health ministries aimed at promoting health and healthy behaviors among congregants and members of surrounding communities. Columbus Medical Association Foundation in Ohio provided funding to a local church for a basketball tournament designed to encourage physical activity and positive body image among youth, while the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund in Kansas provided funding to support a church-based program offering health risk appraisals, health education, fitness activities, and screening programs.

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## SOURCES

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