

Focus on Wellness

Background

Today's health care system is structured around diagnosis and treatment rather than wellness and prevention. We have a "sick" care system rather than a "health" care system. An estimated 133 million Americans – nearly half the population – suffer from at least one chronic illness, such as diabetes, heart disease or asthma. Chronic disease is the number one cause of death and disability in the United States, responsible for seven out of every 10 deaths. Moreover, higher rates of illness mean high health care costs. An estimated 75 percent of health spending is due to chronic disease. In fact, two-thirds of the growth in Medicare spending since 1987 is due to just 10 chronic conditions.

Many chronic diseases are preventable. Prevention includes interventions, such as risk screenings, vaccinations, education on health behavior and primary care. It also includes disease detection, monitoring and treatment, which are critical to stemming disease progression. Research suggests that these activities can significantly reduce disease, disability and death. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that eliminating three risk factors – poor diet, inactivity and smoking – would reduce 80 percent of heart disease and stroke, 30 percent of type 2 diabetes and 40 percent of cancer cases.

AHA View

As part of the *Health for Life* initiative, the AHA determined that a focus on wellness is critical to improving health and health care in America; it is one of the five essential elements for health care reform.

Good health is essential for a productive and vibrant America. A shift in focus towards wellness, disease prevention and chronic care management will help improve individual health. They also may be mechanisms to help mitigate the rise in health care spending. Early investments in wellness have shown to improve health outcomes, worker productivity and quality of life. Additionally, upfront investments in prevention may yield long-term savings to our health care system.

Enhanced Coverage for Preventive Services

Public programs, such as Medicare, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and many private insurance plans often do not pay for recommended preventive services, including routine physical exams, health risk assessments, immunizations and health counseling. In order to encourage individuals to receive – and providers to deliver – preventive care, health insurance programs should fairly reimburse providers for the cost of delivering these services. **The AHA will push for coverage of recommended preventive services in public programs and private plans.** And, given the tremendous value of effective preventive services to individuals and society, we will support policies that strive to minimize or eliminate patient cost-sharing or other barriers to receiving high-value preventive services.

Enhanced Access to Primary Care Services

In order to better focus on wellness, disease prevention and chronic care management, we must ensure that we have the right amount and type of practitioners – including physicians, nurses, mid-level providers and others – to deliver needed care. Practitioners must be encouraged to choose primary care as a profession, and to provide appropriate primary care at the right time and place. Additionally, provider training and education must be modernized to include a focus on keeping people healthy, diagnosing and treating chronic disease, and working in teams to manage complex patients. **The AHA recommends that Congress make the investments necessary to ensure a strong and sustained primary care workforce.**

Workplace Wellness Programs

Given that working adults typically spend half or more of their waking hours at work, workplace initiatives can have a major impact on individual health. Research has shown that keeping employees healthy results in lower health care costs for employers, and higher rates of productivity, less absenteeism and lower rates of disability. Businesses should be encouraged, through tax credits or other mechanisms, to invest in prevention and health promotion practices for their employees. **The AHA will encourage Congress to reward employers that offer effective workplace wellness programs.**

Healthy Choices and Behaviors

Everyone can become healthier – even individuals with acute or chronic medical conditions. Many chronic diseases are preventable through improved lifestyle choices. Recent studies show that moderate weight loss and exercise can prevent diabetes among high-risk individuals. Additionally, many chronic diseases – such as diabetes – can be effectively controlled through early detection and management so that long-term complications are minimized. Incentives should be created to encourage individuals, especially those at highest risk, to take primary ownership of their health. Additionally, our health care system should provide counseling and other support necessary to help individuals adopt more healthy behaviors. Research has shown that counseling all smokers on a regular basis could save roughly 70,000 lives in one year. **The AHA will encourage Congress to support policies that lead individuals to adopt healthier choices and behaviors.**