HOT TOPICS

Proportion of Americans 100 or More Pounds Overweight Growing Rapidly

A health care issue that received increasing Congressional attention last session is the growing incidence of obesity. The portion of Americans with clinically severe obesity is growing twice as fast as the proportion of Americans who are simply obese, according to a recent RAND study. (To be classified as severely obese, an individual has to have a body mass index—a ratio of weight to height—of 40 or higher, roughly 100 pounds or more overweight for an average adult man.) The severely obese increased from 1 in 200 adults in 1986 to 1 in 50 adults in 2000. Such statistics suggest that clinically severe obesity is not a rare pathological condition, but rather an integral part of the population’s weight distribution.

The study’s findings have enormous implications for the nation’s health care system because treatment rates for diabetes, hypertension, and other chronic problems are several times higher among severely obese individuals than among the moderately obese. With these growth rates, accommodating severely obese patients in clinical practice will no longer be an unusual occurrence.

Related research: Effects of obesity on health conditions and health expenditures

Entertainment TV Can Help Teach Teens Responsible Sex Messages

Nearly half of all U.S. high school students have had sex, and their rates of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies are high. The average American adolescent watches almost three hours of TV each day. Sexual content is pervasive on television, and sex is nearly always portrayed as casual and risk-free, a fact that may contribute to teens’ risky sexual behavior. But a recent RAND study shows that when sexual consequences are portrayed, TV can provide responsible sex education for teens, and parental interaction increases the likelihood that teens will learn an accurate lesson.

RAND Health researchers surveyed teens who had watched an episode of the popular comedy “Friends” with a plot that included a pregnancy caused by a condom failure. Most viewers remembered that the episode contained information about condom effectiveness. However, teen viewers who watched or discussed the episode with an adult were twice as likely as others to remember the correct information about condoms.

These results suggest that television can be a positive force in teens’ sex education and can teach the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity with an immediacy that cannot be achieved with books, pamphlets, or classroom instruction.

The findings argue for embedding sex education messages in existing popular programs to communicate about sexual health. This study is part of the RAND Television and Adolescent Sexuality study, a national effort that examines the role television plays in the development of teenagers’ sexual attitudes and behavior.

Full article: Entertainment TV and Responsible Sex Messages

Significant Shortfall in Quality of Health Care for Vulnerable Seniors

The Medicare debate consumed Congress all year. A related but often ignored dimension of the larger health picture is the need to improve basic care for age-related conditions. More than 40 percent of all medical spending in the United States is for people 65 and older; about one third of this group have health problems that make them vulnerable to losing their independence. A recent RAND-UCLA study found that these vulnerable elders get recommended care for age-related conditions such as falls and gait disorders, urinary incontinence, and dementia only about one-third of the time. They receive recommended care for general medical conditions such as heart disease and pneumonia about half the time. The researchers evaluated the care that elders received using quality indicators developed in the Assessing the Care of Vulnerable Elders (ACOVE) project, the most comprehensive assessment system available to measure the quality of medical care provided to vulnerable older Americans.

This study shows that the health care system must make a major effort to improve the ability of primary care physicians to identify and treat the diseases of aging, and older patients and their families need to become better informed to ensure that the elderly receive appropriate care. Primary care physicians may need additional experience or training to recognize and treat the conditions that affect older patients. In addition, Medicare and other insurance programs for seniors do not usually pay for the extra time health providers need to properly assess and treat geriatric illnesses.

Read more: The ACOVE quality indicators

FORTHCOMING PROJECT

The role of schools in meeting community needs during bioterrorism

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