



# Health Policy Snapshot

Public Health and Prevention

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## ISSUE BRIEF

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# How does an investment in prevention improve public health?

## Takeaways:

- Strategic investments in proven community-based prevention programs could result in significant savings in U.S. health care costs.
- Provisions in the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) assist state and community efforts to prevent disease and promote health so that all Americans can lead longer, more productive lives.
- Policymakers at all levels of government have an opportunity to advance prevention as a way to reduce disease rates and lower health care spending.

## Overview

Chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes are responsible for seven in 10 deaths among Americans each year and account for nearly 75 percent of the nation's health spending.<sup>1</sup> More than 40 percent of the population has more than one chronic health condition.<sup>2</sup> Preventing disease and injury is the most cost-effective, common-sense way to improve health in the United States. Too often, however, the health care system focuses more on treating disease and injury after they happen.

## PREVENTION REDUCES COSTS

The costs of "sick care" are staggering. Hundreds of

billions of dollars are spent annually to treat preventable illnesses and diseases. For instance, public and private health care expenditures due to smoking total \$96 billion<sup>3</sup>. Costs associated with conditions caused by obesity are also astronomical, including nearly \$17 billion for diabetes and more than \$43 billion for hypertension.<sup>4</sup>

Even small investments could yield big savings down the road. An investment of \$10 per person per year in proven community-based programs to increase physical activity, improve nutrition and prevent smoking and other tobacco use could save the country more than \$16 billion annually within five years. That's a return of \$5.60 for every \$1 spent.<sup>5</sup>

The evidence shows that implementing such programs reduces rates of type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure by 5 percent within two years; reduces heart disease, kidney disease and stroke by 5 percent within five years; and reduces some forms of cancer, arthritis and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease by 2.5 percent within 10 to 20 years.<sup>5</sup>

Major public health initiatives improve health and save dollars. In a recent report, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the United States saved billions of dollars in health care costs as a result of major public health achievements during the 21<sup>st</sup> century's first decade. The achievements included fortifying foods with folic acid to reduce neural tube defects in children (\$4.6 billion saved over 10 years); vaccinating children

(potential savings of up to \$20 billion over the children's lifetime); preventing motor vehicle crashes (potential savings of up to \$99 billion in medical costs and lost productivity costs annually); and lowering lead exposure (estimated savings of \$213 billion annually).<sup>6</sup>

## THE ACA AND PREVENTION

The ACA contains numerous provisions related to prevention and public health.

- **Prevention and Public Health Fund.** The Prevention and Public Health Fund, designed to assist state and community efforts, has \$15 billion in mandatory funding over 10 years. The fund supports programs for disease prevention, wellness and public health activities, including prevention research and health screenings and initiatives.
- **National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy.** The strategy was developed by the National Prevention, Health Promotion and Public Health Council, comprised of 17 federal agencies that consulted with outside experts. It recognizes that good health comes not just from receiving quality medical care but from averting disease,<sup>7</sup> and its goal is to increase the number of Americans who are healthy at age 85. The strategy's foundation is based on four pillars: building healthy and safe communities, expanding quality preventive services in both clinical and community settings, empowering people to make healthy choices and eliminating health disparities.<sup>8</sup>
- **No-cost preventive health services.** Health insurance plans subject to the ACA must offer some preventive health services to policyholders at no extra cost. Services may include blood pressure and diabetes tests, healthy eating counseling, routine vaccinations and annual well-baby and well-child visits. These services are proven and effective means of encouraging healthy living.<sup>9</sup>

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers and leaders at all levels can advance prevention efforts as a way to reduce disease rates and lower health care spending.<sup>10</sup>

- **Support full implementation of the National Prevention Strategy.** The strategy outlines action steps that public and private partners can take to improve the nation's health. Through the Prevention and Public Health Fund, every state has received money to implement evidenced-based programs to support wellness, physical activity and good nutrition, prevent smoking, strengthen our public health system and improve people's lives while helping to control health care costs.
- **Use health impact assessments.** Health impact assessments (HIAs) are tools to ensure health is considered in all proposed policies, programs and projects—especially in non-health sectors such as housing, education, transportation and energy. HIAs can inform policymakers about the health consequences of a new project or policy.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [\*Prevention for a Healthier America \(TFAH\)\*](#)
- [\*National Prevention Strategy \(National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council\)\*](#)
- [\*Ten Great Public Health Achievements \(CDC\)\*](#)
- [\*County Health Rankings \(RWJF/University of Wisconsin\)\*](#)
- [\*ACA's Prevention and Public Health Fund in Your State \(HealthCare.Gov\)\*](#)

<sup>1</sup><http://www.healthreform.gov/newsroom/preventioncouncil.html>

<sup>2</sup><http://healthreformgps.org/resources/chronic-disease-management/>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0072.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>[chronicdiseaseimpact.org](http://chronicdiseaseimpact.org)

<sup>5</sup><http://www.healthamericans.org/reports/prevention08/>

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2011/p0519\\_publichealthachievements.html](http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2011/p0519_publichealthachievements.html)

<sup>7</sup><http://www.rwjf.org/publichealth/product.jsp?id=72012>

<sup>8</sup><http://www.healthcare.gov/news/factsheets/prevention06162011a.html>

<sup>9</sup><http://www.healthcare.gov/law/provisions/preventive/index.html>

<sup>10</sup><http://www.healthamericans.org/assets/files/TFAH%202010Top10PrioritiesDiseasePrevention.pdf>