



Americans ration their health care

The economic downturn is hitting people on multiple fronts. A new poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation finds that, compared to a year ago, more Americans are struggling to pay their medical bills:

36 percent of respondents said they or a family member postponed getting needed health care in the past year, compared to 29 percent a year ago

32 percent skipped a recommended medical test or treatment, compared to 24 percent a year ago

27 percent didn't fill a prescription, compared to 23 percent a year ago

22 percent cut pills or skipped doses of medicine, compared to 19 percent a year ago

NEARLY HALF

of those polled — **47 percent** — said they have cut back on health care in some way

Living Well is designed to provide general information. It is not intended to be, nor is it, medical advice. Readers should consult their physicians when they have health problems.

'D'efense for the flu

BY MICHELLE GIBEAULT TRAUB

Ever wonder why flu tends to appear when temperatures drop? Scientists believe flu season occurs in the winter months due to a decrease in direct sunlight. Less sun exposure means less vitamin D production, a nutrient your body produces from the sun's rays. Studies have shown

that vitamin D plays an important role in immune function. When people are deficient in vitamin D, especially during the winter months, viruses invade. An easy solution is to increase your defenses by getting enough of this important nutrient. Most experts recommend consuming 1,000 IUs of vitamin D per day through fortified dairy products, fatty fish and nutritional supplements. But more D is not the only key to a healthy, strong immune system.



Drink Up. Tea can really boost the immune system. Studies show that compounds in white, green, black and red teas have antiviral properties that support the body's natural defenses. Add a splash of lemon juice for an even greater kick, since citrus juice helps to increase the antioxidant content of your drink.

Eat Well. Never underestimate the power of a healthy diet, says Dr. Ann Kulze, a private practice physician and

Lessons learned from recent diabetes trials

BY DR. JOEL KUPERSMITH

Last year, results were reported from three large studies on treating diabetes. The challenge now for experts is figuring out what it all means for patients and doctors.

Two of the trials, published together in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, appeared to contradict each other. A National Institutes of Health-funded study that included more than 10,000

patients found that intensive drug therapy to lower blood sugar offered no added benefit for the heart. In fact, part of the trial was halted when researchers unexpectedly found a higher death rate among those receiving more aggressive treatment.

The second trial, which included 11,000 patients in Australia, Europe and Asia, found no such adverse effects.

nationally recognized nutrition and wellness expert. "Eat an abundance of brightly colored fruits and veggies to take advantage of their immune-boosting phytochemicals, vitamin C and beta carotene," she reminds her patients. Her favorites include berries, citrus fruits, kale, spinach, sweet potatoes and carrots. Foods such as mushrooms, broccoli, onions and garlic also have compounds that help the body fight infection. In addition, look for foods like yogurt and supplements with probiotics that help feed the immune cells produced in the digestive tract.

Increasing your intake of omega-3 fatty acids is yet another proven way to aid immune function. Omega-3 fats are found primarily in fatty fish like salmon, tuna and herring, and in smaller amounts in walnuts and flaxseeds. Finally, don't forget the old standby, chicken soup,

which helps to relieve inflammation and congestion.

Avoid Germs. Cold and flu viruses can't cause illness unless they find a way into your body. Their main points of entry are the eyes, nose and mouth. A good rule is to keep your hands away from your face. And think before you touch. For example, that pen at the pharmacy or grocery store has been touched by many other people before you. To minimize your exposure to germs, carry your own pen. Also, wash your hands after touching public property such as door-knobs, shopping carts or telephones. If hand washing is not an option, use antibacterial gel or wipes. Remember, a strong immune system is your greatest defense against illness.

Michelle Gibeault Traub is a registered dietitian and health writer living in Connecticut.



More 'D' from mushrooms?

Mushrooms produce vitamin D when exposed to sunlight. That's especially good news for vegetarians, since many of the food sources of vitamin D are animal products, including egg yolks and fish. The catch is that

mushrooms are normally grown under dark conditions. But given the need for more dietary sources of vitamin D, researchers are working with growers to uncover a way to harvest mushrooms with more vitamin D.

In June and September, researchers presented the results of VA's diabetes trial, which included nearly 1,800 veterans and ran seven years. It found that intensive glucose control did not reduce heart risk compared with standard treatment, nor did it yield added benefits for the kidneys or eyes. But tight control of other factors through medication and lifestyle changes did appear to improve outcomes.

Experts are still analyzing the three trials but have gleaned several lessons, including:

- Aggressive glucose control may be most helpful early in treatment.
- Controlling other risk factors – high blood pressure, cholesterol – is critical.
- Hypoglycemia, in which blood sugar drops too low from treatment, should be carefully avoided.

If you have diabetes, ask your doctor what these studies mean for your care.

Joel Kupersmith, M.D., is chief research and development officer for the Veterans Health Administration.

Kick the habit



For those wanting to stop smoking, the Mayo Clinic reminds you there is no better time than now – and that there are plenty of resources to help.

- Mayo recommends that smokers identify their reasons to quit. For example, it will improve your health and set a better example for your kids.
- Next, talk to your doctor about medicines that help ease the transition away from nicotine. Options include nicotine gum, nicotine patches and nicotine replacement therapy.
- Enlist the help of family and close friends and encourage any of them who smoke to quit with you.

Mayo has an entire section of its Web site devoted to helping people kick the habit of smoking.

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/quit-smoking/QS99999>

TESTING POSI+IVE

Cancer 'sniffer'

The Monell Center, a scientific research organization based in Philadelphia, has pioneered a method that may help diagnose skin cancer by distinguishing its chemical "scent" from that of healthy skin cells.

"Human skin produces numerous airborne chemical molecules known as volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, many of which are odorous," the Monell Center reports. These VOCs serve as markers for healthy or cancerous skin cells. "Our findings may someday allow doctors to screen for and diagnose skin cancers at very early stages," says Monell's Dr. Michelle Gallagher.

www.monell.org