

# Surgeon General's Perspectives

---

## THE NATIONAL PREVENTION STRATEGY: SHIFTING THE NATION'S HEALTH-CARE SYSTEM

I know the pain and hardship that can strain a family when they experience the loss of a loved one. I lost my mother to smoking-related lung cancer, my father to a stroke, and my brother to human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), all of which are preventable diseases. It is my mission to keep other Americans from having to experience such preventable losses. For this reason, it is my hope to pioneer our nation's first-ever prevention movement. The National Prevention Strategy,<sup>1</sup> called for in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act,<sup>2</sup> will shift our nation's health-care system from one based on sickness and disease to one focused on prevention and wellness. We need to stop diseases before they start and allow all Americans to be healthy and fit.

The health and vitality of Americans are critical to the productivity and innovation essential for our nation's future. Students who are healthy and fit come to school ready to learn; employees who are free from mental and physical conditions take fewer sick days, are more productive, and help strengthen the economy; and older adults who remain physically and mentally active are more likely to live independently.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we need to weave disease prevention into the everyday fabric of our lives, including where we live, work, learn, and play.

Although the U.S. spends more on health care than any other country, our nation ranks lower than several other nations in life expectancy, infant mortality, and other healthy life indicators.<sup>3</sup> Our government is striving to change our health-care system for the better, and prevention is essential. A 2006 study by Maciosek et al. determined that increasing the use of preventive services—including tobacco cessation screening, alcohol abuse screening, and aspirin use—to 90% of the recommended levels could save \$3.7 billion annually in medical costs.<sup>4</sup> Shifting our nation's focus toward preventive health will not only result in cost savings but, more importantly, will save and improve lives.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS AND PRIORITIES

The National Prevention Strategy is a guide for our nation to provide the most useful and attainable means



VADM Regina M. Benjamin,  
Surgeon General

for leading a healthy lifestyle. This comprehensive plan encompasses four strategic directions that serve as the foundation for all prevention efforts.

### Healthy and safe community environments

Our nation must build healthy and safe community environments. Health should be omnipresent and universal—in our homes, schools, and workplaces. By enhancing the quality of our nation's air, land, and water, we can lessen people's exposure to environmental hazards and the associated risks of these exposures on health. By designing and promoting affordable, accessible, and safe housing that is free from toxins, hazards, and pollutants, we can give all people an equal opportunity at healthy living.

### Clinical and community preventive services

We must maintain and enhance our clinical and community preventive services. We know that when people receive preventive care, such as immunizations and cancer screenings, they have better health and lower health-care costs. For example, by focusing on improving our nation's cardiovascular health, we can save tens of thousands of lives each year. While preventive services are traditionally delivered in clinical settings, some can be delivered within communities, worksites, schools, residential treatment centers, or homes.

Clinical preventive services can be supported and reinforced by community-based prevention, policies, and programs. Community programs can also play a role in promoting the use of clinical preventive services and assisting patients in overcoming barriers to preventive services (e.g., transportation, child care, and patient navigation issues).

### Empowered people

We must empower people to make responsible, informed, and healthy choices. By providing people with the tools and information to make healthy decisions, we can lead our country to become an independent and reliable manager of its own health. People want to be healthy; we need to provide them with easy and affordable options to maintain their health. These options include access to healthy food, places to exercise, appropriate nutrition information, and positive social interactions.

### Elimination of health disparities

Finally, we must eliminate the health disparities that exist in our nation. No population should shoulder a disproportionate burden of illness and disease. Unfortunately, many health concerns, including heart disease, asthma, obesity, and HIV/AIDS, disproportionately affect certain populations of people. Without education and employment, people are often ill-equipped to make healthy choices. Education can increase health knowledge and allow people to make better-informed choices for themselves and their families. Employment can provide access to health coverage and prevention care, allow people to live in healthy and safe neighborhoods and housing, and enable families to afford healthy food and other basic goods. Programs and policies to reduce high school dropout rates make advanced education more attainable, promote job growth, and, ultimately, have a large impact on people's ability to make healthy choices.<sup>1</sup> With a strategic focus on the communities at greatest risk, and those that require the greatest support, we can work toward providing all Americans with a chance to live a healthy and fit life.

### Priority areas

In addition to these strategic directions, the National Prevention Strategy has identified seven priority areas that require immediate focus to improve the health of the American people, particularly those who are disproportionately affected by disease and injury:<sup>1</sup>

- Tobacco-free living
- Preventing drug abuse and excessive alcohol use

- Healthy eating
- Active living
- Injury- and violence-free living
- Reproductive and sexual health
- Mental and emotional well-being

In focusing on these priorities, the National Prevention Strategy seeks to address the underlying causes—e.g., tobacco use, misuse of alcohol and other substances, obesity, and community stressors such as discrimination and violence—of chronic conditions (e.g., heart disease and diabetes) and unintentional injuries.

### A NATION'S EFFORT

While the core of this prevention movement will come from a trained and knowledgeable prevention workforce that is attuned to community and population conditions and disparities, and equipped to serve the needs of an aging nation, many other stakeholders will need to help ensure the success of this National Prevention Strategy.

Public and private sectors alike can improve the coordination and collaboration of prevention-driven services and programs that address key health needs. For instance, businesses can support workplace wellness, health providers can enhance health-care quality and delivery, and educators can incorporate prevention competencies into relevant curricula.

On the individual level, we can all make changes to incorporate prevention activities into our day-to-day lifestyle. Using alternative transportation such as biking or walking, purchasing energy-efficient household products and recycling, and better managing personal health through technology such as text reminders and phone applications are all simple ways to make informed, responsible, and healthy choices.

This strategy for disease prevention must become America's plan. All of us, together, must take ownership of our health, and we must collaborate and cooperate to achieve a healthy and fit America.



Regina M. Benjamin, MD, MBA  
VADM, U.S. Public Health Service  
Surgeon General

The author thanks Arndreya D. Price, Neha A. Deshpande, and Jo Ellen Russ for their contributions to this article.

**REFERENCES**

1. National Prevention Council (US). National Prevention Strategy: America's plan for better health and wellness. Washington: Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General (US); 2011. Also available from: URL: <http://www.healthcare.gov/center/councils/nphpphc/strategy/report.pdf> [cited 2011 Jul 14].
2. Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Pub. L. No. 111-148 (2010).
3. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (US), Office of the Actuary, National Health Statistics Group. National health expenditures 2009 highlights [cited 2011 Aug 22]. Available from: URL: <http://www.cms.gov/NationalHealthExpendData/downloads/highlights.pdf>
4. Maciosek MV, Coffield AB, Flottemesch TJ, Edwards NM, Solberg LI. Greater use of preventive services in U.S. health care could save lives at little or no cost. *Health Aff (Millwood)* 2010;29:1656-60.