

# Good Behavior



Center for Advancing Health

## Americans Have Yet to Step Up to the New Demands of Health Care

Health care is one of many strategies we enlist in our effort to live our lives free of suffering. The Center for Advancing Health, which I direct, just released a study that found that most of us do relatively little to participate in our health care.

This study focuses on Americans' engagement in our health care. To benefit fully, we and our caregivers face a growing number of responsibilities to find safe, decent care and then make good use of it.

Health care reform has sparked a multitude of new efforts, many of which are directed to be "patient-centered," and it is important to institutionalize support for our engagement in our care in the policies, measures and practices that are developed.

To assess where we are now, CFAH searched 31 national surveys sponsored by the government and foundations to locate data on the specific behaviors that each of us must do in order to participate effectively. For example, I have to make sure that my medical information is conveyed to my various doctors and institutions. I have to question my doctor when the next steps I have to take are not clear. And I have to talk about recommended tests and treatments with my doctor to make the right choice for me.

For the vast majority of engagement behaviors like this for which data were found, about one-third of us do them regularly, about one-third of us do them occasionally and one-third of us don't do them at all.

When the data were examined within and across the surveys, some patterns emerged:

- More of us are willing to perform simpler tasks (e.g., make a list of medications) than complex actions, (e.g., make informed treatment decisions).
- The depth of our participation in any engagement behavior tends to be shallow. For example, more of us seek out information about a provider or health plan

than actually use that information to make a choice.

- We appear to defer information and advice-seeking until we have a specific need: our participation takes place "just in time."

For any single engagement behavior, those of us who are less likely to participate have less education, more marginal health literacy, lower incomes, lack of health insurance and tend to have more health problems. While such barriers affect many people, lack of participation is also common among those of us who face none of them.

Recently passed health care reform will increase our access to care, but without our active, knowledgeable participation - from both those of us who are currently and newly insured - that reform will yield only sporadic improvements.

While each of us - along with our caregivers and loved ones - must take on these responsibilities if we are to benefit optimally from our health care, we cannot do so without the cooperation of every stakeholder in the health care enterprise.

It is time to bring to the challenge of increasing Americans' participation in health care the same energy, commitment as have been devoted to increasing access and improving quality.

The health of each of us - mine, yours, my mom's, your son's, our neighbors' - and the health of the nation depend on both our ability and willingness to participate actively in our care.

**Jessie C. Gruman, PhD**  
President

## From the Health Behavior News Service

The Health Behavior News Service regularly distributes stories summarizing new research on health behavior issues. These stories can be found online at <http://www.cfah.org/hbns/news/>

### April/May News Stories:

- **DEATHS WOULD DROP WITH MORE PREVENTIVE SERVICES** "Prevention is the best medicine," the saying goes. According to a new study, increasing the use of that medicine could prevent a significant number of adult deaths annually.
- **TEENS WITH DIABETES MIGHT NEED HELP IN TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD** It is hard enough being a teenager – or the parent of a teenager – without also having to deal with type 1 diabetes. It only gets more interesting as adolescents become young adults.
- **PARENTS CAN HELP OVERWEIGHT KIDS WITH BODY IMAGE** When parents maintain a healthy body image and weight-control strategies, overweight adolescent children tend to follow their example, a new study reveals.
- **EXERCISE-BASED REHAB FOR HEART FAILURE CAN IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE** New research finds that exercise-based rehabilitation clearly improves the health-related quality of life of persons with heart failure.
- **CHIROPRACTIC TREATMENT OFFERS SOME RELIEF FOR EARLY LOW BACK PAIN** Deciding which health professional can best treat your low back pain? Chiropractors can help, a new review finds, although others can as well.
- **SELF-MONITORING LOWERS RISKS FOR PATIENTS ON ANTI-CLOTTING DRUG** A new review finds that many patients who take an anti-clotting drug or "blood-thinner" can benefit from monitoring the levels of the drug themselves instead of going to clinics for blood tests.
- **EMPLOYMENT AND INSURANCE: NO GUARANTEE FOR BETTER HEALTH** Having health insurance does not mean workers will take advantage of immunizations, cancer screenings and other preventive health services, a new study finds.

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ADVANCING  
HEALTH  
*Evidence. Engagement. Equity.*

Since its founding in 1992, The Center for Advancing Health (CFAH) has worked to translate complex scientific evidence into information, policies and programs that will ensure that each person can make good decisions about their health and interact effectively with their health care providers. CFAH is an independent, non-profit organization that is supported by a number of philanthropic organizations (principally the Annenberg Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation) and individuals. Good Behavior is a monthly series, written by the Center's president, Jessie Gruman, PhD, and intended for health policy makers. The publication offers Dr. Gruman's perspective on emerging health care issues, and provides insight based on evidence about how best to address them. For more information, visit us online at [www.cfah.org](http://www.cfah.org)