

U.S. Childrens' Health Worsens In 1995 — Report

WASHINGTON - American children smoked more cigarettes, used more cocaine, were generally fatter and got less exercise this year than last, the American Health Foundation disclosed Monday.

In its annual report card on children's health, the foundation graded the United States a D—down from 1994's grade of C-minus—because of low marks in the area of drug, alcohol and tobacco use as well as increases in such preventable diseases as measles. There was slight improvement in the infant mortality rate, but the United States still trails 22 other industrialized nations in this area, the report said.

It said 19.4 percent of high school seniors smoked cigarettes in 1994, up from 19 percent the previous year and far higher than the foundation's

goal for 1998 of 14 percent or less. Nearly a third of seniors used marijuana daily, 30.9 percent compared with 26 percent for the previous year and 22 percent for two years ago, the study said.

For crack cocaine, statistics were equally discouraging with 1.9 percent of high school seniors using the highly addictive drug daily, up from 1.5 percent the previous year.

Twenty-one percent of children aged 12-17 were judged to be obese in 1988-91, the most recent period studied, compared with 15 percent for the period 1976-80.

Fewer children got daily exercise in school, the report said, comparing the most recent statistics for 1993, when 34 percent of ninth- to 12th-graders got daily school exercise, to 1991, when 42 percent did.

On the positive side, fewer children got pertussis, also known as whooping cough, and tetanus, two diseases preventable by vaccines. And fewer teen-agers contracted syphilis and hepatitis B.

"If we are to avoid the many diseases and disabilities related to poor health behavior, both parents and schools must share responsibility for the health education of children at an early age," foundation president Ernst Wynder said in a statement.

A panel of experts reviewing the report recommended that

optimal pre- and post-natal care be made available to at least 95 percent of all pregnant women. In addition, they called for mandatory, comprehensive, long-term school health education programs, beginning in kindergarten or pre-school.

In another study, researchers at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Hyattsville, Maryland, said 11 percent of American children and adolescents are overweight—about twice the level of 10 years ago and more than double the level in the 1960s.

The researchers, who studied data compiled from 1988 to 1991 on 2,290 children and adolescents aged 6 to 17 and compared those results with earlier surveys, found the prevalence of overweight was generally steady for adolescents but rose slowly for younger children through the 1960s and 1970s and increased sharply in the 1980s.

Richard Troiano, who led the survey, said the percentage of overweight U.S. adults rose at the same time. There were no causes given but he said any

number of things could have contributed such as changes in diet or exercise habits.

The major health concern is that people who are overweight in childhood are more likely to be overweight adults, bringing increased risks of heart disease and other chronic illness.

The research was published in the October issue of the American Medical Association's Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine. It was presented Monday at the AMA's 14th annual Science Reporters Convention.

HEALTH BRIEFS

LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR MINORITIES

HOUSTON — Minority college students and graduates interested in pursuing medical degrees may apply for the Honors Premedical Academy at Baylor College of Medicine and Rice University, both in Houston.

The national program, funded in part by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is designed to increase minority representation in medicine by enhancing participants' competitiveness in the medical-school application pool.

Participants must be African American, Mexican-American, mainland Puerto Rican or Native American.

Participants in the six-week summer program spend mornings in medical settings paired with Baylor physicians and afternoons in Rice science and communications classes.

Additional information on the 1996 Honors Premedical Academy is available by calling 1-800-798-8244.

HELP FOR INCONTINENCE IN OLDER WOMEN

HOUSTON — For millions of elderly women in the U.S. and Canada who suffer from urge incontinence, help is available.

"To help older women avoid diapers, it is important they know what kind of incontinence they have and what remedies are available," said Dr. Timothy B. Boone, a urologist at Baylor College of Medicine. "They also need to know that acting early can make a big difference."

Many older women are affected with urge incontinence.

It occurs when their bladder muscle "misfires," causing urine to be expelled unexpectedly.

Urge incontinence can be controlled with medication and/or bladder training using biofeedback. It does not require surgery.

"A lot of women put themselves in diapers without realizing their urge incontinence will respond to medicine or behavioral training," Boone said.

DRUG BEING STUDIED FOR AIDS EYE DISORDERS

HOUSTON — A drug under study may offer hope for reducing the frequency and complexity of treatment for AIDS patients with cytomegalovirus-related eye disorders.

With the drug HPMP, treatment can be given every two weeks rather than daily, as now required with foscarnet and gancyclovir and has seen excellent healing of retinitis. The first phase of the drug study followed 30 AIDS patients in 15 U.S. centers, enrolling patients who had never been treated with antiviral drugs. Phase 2 will follow 70 people.

MIDDLE-EAR INFECTIONS CAN BE SERIOUS

HOUSTON — it is the peak season for one of the most common childhood illnesses, and many parents don't know it.

Middle-ear infection, or otitis media, can occur any time of year, but fall and winter are especially bad, said Dr. Newton O. Duncan, a pediatrician at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

Middle-ear infections strike (See Health Briefs, Page 20)

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