

HEALTH

Report: Poor housing detrimental to children

Special to Sentinel-Voice

BOSTON — Where children live can have as big an effect on their health as the food they eat, the shots they receive and the medical ailments they have at birth, according to a report released last week.

The findings, compiled from nearly 100 anecdotes from doctors, nurses and social workers around the country, indicate doctors should ask their patients more questions about conditions at home, said Dr. Megan Sandel, one of the report's lead authors.

"For many of our patients, being able to get them better housing is one of the best medical interventions we can do for them to help them stay healthy," said Sandel, a pediatric resident at the inner-city Boston Medical Center, where the report was compiled.

Over the last year, the doctors received nearly 100 e-mailed anecdotes from health professionals in Boston, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia and Seattle, describing how bad housing adversely affected a young patient's health.

Using those stories and dozens of articles from medical journals, they estimated the impact of substandard housing

on children's health.

The doctors concede the figures are impossible to verify.

But the report says chronically ill children who teeter precariously between sickness and good health are more likely to suffer setbacks when their housing is inadequate.

At urban hospitals in particular, the report says, children routinely arrive in emergency rooms with problems made worse by inadequate housing: asthma from dust, mold and cockroaches, and burns from exposed heaters.

Many children also show up malnourished because their parents are forced to choose between paying the rent or buying food — a syndrome health professionals call "heat or eat."

According to the doctors' estimates, nearly 18,000 children are hospitalized each year because of asthma complications from cockroaches, rats and mold.

Another 1,400 are hospitalized with burns from exposed radiators.

Thousands more end up in emergency rooms from malnutrition because their parents couldn't afford both food and shelter.

Adult cancer often starts in childhood, cancer experts say

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — The long path to adult cancer often begins in childhood.

Exposure to parental tobacco smoke and increased teen and preteen smoking may be contributing to more and more cases of adult cancers, say pediatric cancer and pulmonary experts.

"Millions of U.S. children have been exposed to environmental tobacco smoke," said Dr. David G. Poplack, director of the Texas Children's Cancer Center (TCCC) in Houston. "These children are at risk for cancer later in life as a result of these early exposures."

Poplack, chief of pediatric hematology and oncology at Baylor College of Medicine and Texas Children's Hospital, says that children are smoking at earlier ages.

Statistics support this. According to the Texas Department of Health, each day more than 3,000 American youth try a tobacco product for the first time.

More than half of high school students, 27 percent of sixth-graders and 10 percent of fourth-graders have tried tobacco.

They are experimenting with a deadly combination, says Dr. D. J. Murry, a pharmacology expert at the Texas Children's Cancer Center.

"These kids are often unaware that there is a cocktail of
(See *Cancer*, Page 16)

Heart disorders not just an adult problem

By James L. Phillips, M.D.

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Most people associate heart disease with old age.

This is often the case, but it's a little-discussed topic that many of our young people also experience disorders of the heart, according to experts at Baylor College of Medicine.

The teenage athlete who dies suddenly on the playing field is the statistic that is most likely to make the morning newspaper. Usually this is the result of a rare disorder.

But a surprising percentage of young people have problems with high blood pressure and high cholesterol — both serious precursors to heart complications.

For example, according to Baylor College of Medicine adolescent health experts, 21 percent of children ages 6 to 17 are obese.

Consider these statistics from the American Heart Association and the National Center for Health Statistics regarding heart health and lifestyles that are conducive to poor heart health:

- An estimated 36 percent of American youth age 19 and under have elevated cholesterol levels of 170 mg/dl or higher. This is equal to 200 mg/dl in adults.

- More than one in four Americans age 18 report no leisure-time physical activity. Less than 36 percent of elementary and secondary schools offer daily physical education classes.

- About 2.4 million of today's 45 million American smokers are teenagers. An estimated 3,000 teens start smoking each day. Three-fourths of adult smokers started before age 18.

- More than 2.8 million children ages 6 to 17 have high blood pressure.

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