

# The Growing Crisis of Chronic Disease in the United States

## Chronic Diseases: What Are They?

Chronic diseases are ongoing, generally incurable illnesses or conditions, such as heart disease, asthma, cancer, and diabetes. These diseases are often preventable, and frequently manageable through early detection, improved diet, exercise, and treatment therapy.

## Chronic Diseases: Costing Lives, Reducing Quality of Life

Chronic diseases are the leading cause of death and disability in the United States.

- 133 million Americans – 45% of the population – have at least one chronic disease.<sup>1</sup>
- Chronic diseases are responsible for seven out of every 10 deaths in the U.S., killing more than 1.7 million Americans every year.<sup>2</sup>
- Chronic diseases can be disabling and reduce a person's quality of life, especially if left undiagnosed or untreated. For example, every 30 seconds a lower limb is amputated as a consequence of diabetes.<sup>3</sup>

## Chronic Diseases: Increasing Demand for Health Care and Driving Up Costs

People with chronic conditions are the most frequent users of health care in the U.S.

- They account for 81% of hospital admissions; 91% of all prescriptions filled; and 76% of all physician visits.<sup>4</sup>

Chronic diseases also account for the vast majority of health spending. In the U.S., total spending on public and private health care amounted to approximately \$2 trillion during 2005.<sup>5</sup>

- Of that amount, more than 75% went toward treatment of chronic disease.<sup>6</sup>
- That is equivalent to \$5,000 worth of spending per person on treatment of chronic disease<sup>7</sup> – more than double what the average American spends on gasoline in a year.<sup>8</sup>

- In publicly funded health programs, spending on chronic disease represents an even greater proportion of total spending: more than 96% in Medicare and 83% in Medicaid.<sup>9</sup>

## Chronic Diseases: Costing U.S. Employers and Employees

U.S. employers and employees are paying for the high costs of chronic disease through the increase in health costs associated with greater demand for and use of health care services.

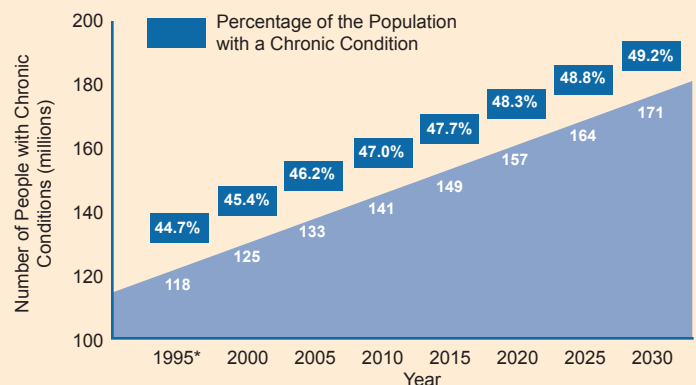
- Health care premiums for employer-sponsored family coverage have increased by 87% since 2000.<sup>10</sup>
- Health care coverage costs for people with a chronic condition average \$6,032 annually – five times higher than for those without such a condition.<sup>11</sup>
- The total cost of obesity to U.S. companies is estimated at \$13 billion annually. This includes the “extra” cost of health insurance (\$8 billion), sick leave (\$2.4 billion), life insurance (\$1.8 billion), and disability insurance (\$1 billion) associated with obesity.<sup>12</sup>

## Chronic Diseases: Costing Our Future

While today's situation is grave, the chronic disease crisis looms even larger tomorrow.

- By 2025, chronic diseases will affect an estimated 164 million Americans – nearly half (49%) of the population (see Chart 1).<sup>13</sup>

**Chart 1: The Number of People with Chronic Conditions Is Rapidly Increasing**



Source: Wu, Shin-Yi, and Green, Anthony. *Projection of Chronic Illness Prevalence and Cost Inflation*. RAND Corporation, October 2000.

- Overweight rates have been climbing over the past few decades among children. About 9 million (or roughly one in six kids ages 6–19) were overweight in 2004 – more than triple the number of overweight children in 1980.<sup>14</sup>
- Given current trends, one in three children born in 2000 will develop diabetes over the course of a lifetime.<sup>15</sup>

### Chronic Diseases: Often Preventable, Frequently Manageable

Many chronic diseases could be prevented, delayed, or alleviated, through simple lifestyle changes.

- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)<sup>16</sup> estimates that eliminating three risk factors – poor diet, inactivity, and smoking – would prevent:
  - 80% of heart disease and stroke;
  - 80% of type 2 diabetes; and,
  - 40% of cancer.



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