Opportunities for Health Plans to Help Prevent Diabetes in Children

If the current rate of diabetes diagnosis continues, nearly one-third of the children who were born in 2000 will be diagnosed with diabetes by 2050. Rates of both type 1 and type 2 diabetes in children have been on the rise, and while a single cause for this increase remains elusive, childhood obesity—a risk factor for developing diabetes—has also been steadily increasing. Uncontrolled gestational diabetes is also a risk factor: it can lead to overweight babies who have a greater chance of becoming overweight during childhood, increasing their risk of developing diabetes.

A large body of research has been devoted to the negative, long-term health impacts of childhood obesity and diabetes, however recent research indicates there are also more immediate non-medical issues associated with diabetes that warrant attention and action. A recent study found that children and young adults with diabetes are less likely to complete high school and are expected to earn less money than their non-diabetic peers. In fact, this study found that by the age of 30, a person with diabetes is ten percent less likely to be employed than a person who has never been diagnosed with the condition. Those who are employed at age 30 can expect to earn about $6,000 less than their non-diabetic peers. With diabetes diagnoses in children on the rise, these results point to a need for increased support for programs and initiatives to prevent diabetes in children and young adults.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) contains provisions to encourage diabetes-prevention activities to coalesce into a unified strategy, moving away from the current silo-based approach where organizations and government agencies conduct primarily independent prevention activities. A recent article published in the January 2012 issue of Health Affairs cites several ACA provisions as critical components of a unified national strategy: the National Diabetes Prevention Program, the Prevention and Public Health Fund and the creation of community health teams. In addition to these provisions that create the opportunity for large-scale health policy changes, evidence suggests that smaller, more incremental changes to existing programs may also be effective, such as those that can be undertaken by health plans and health plan foundations.

What Can Health Plans Do?

Health plans and health plan foundations are well-equipped to join in the fight against diabetes. Health plans and foundations can:

- educate their diabetic members (especially adolescents) to take control of their medication routine, diet and exercise;
- advance the use of text messaging programs to support adherence to diabetes medications;
- support programs in the community that work to prevent diabetes in children and young adults;
- encourage all members to maintain a healthy weight, as obesity is a major risk factor for type 2 diabetes; and
- invest in a diabetes prevention program that can be offered to employers and members to educate them on the risk factors of childhood diabetes.

Health Plans Making a Difference

The WellPoint Foundation, the philanthropic arm of WellPoint, Inc., one of the nation’s largest health insurers, granted $1.5 million to the American Diabetes Association (ADA) in 2009 to support a three-year partnership to raise awareness about diabetes risk factors through two programs. The first program, Alert Day National PR Campaign, aims to increase the number of Americans who take an online diabetes risk assessment test at StopDiabetes.com. Approximately 17 million Americans are diabetic but do not know it. Awareness of personal risk factors may encourage people to talk to their physicians about diabetes, increasing prevention activities and earlier diagnoses. To date, Alert Day has driven over 82,000 people to the Stop Diabetes website, resulting in over 10,000 people taking the risk assessment test. Funding from the WellPoint Foundation also supports the creation and distribution of a Stop Diabetes toolkit for community-based organizations. Over 5,000 toolkits have been distributed to various organizations to date.

WellPoint Foundation has also provided funding to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International to distribute educational materials to 500 children and adults who are at risk of developing diabetes or complications from existing diabetes.

Txt4health

Three United States cities are engaging in a new diabetes awareness program called txt4health. New Orleans, Detroit and Cincinnati are teaming up with the American Diabetes Association, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC), and Voxiva to provide a free text message service to residents. Txt4health messages prompt users to answer questions to help determine the user’s personal risk factors for type 2 diabetes. Txt4health also connects users to local resources, provides diet and exercise tips, and assists with personal goal tracking. BlueCross BlueShield of Louisiana is supporting txt4health by making members aware of the service via Twitter and by supporting txt4health kick-off events.

Diabetes Resources

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) maintain up-to-date information about diabetes, including tips for parents to help children manage the condition. The Diabetes in School factsheet was updated in August 2011.
*National Diabetes Education Program* is a partnership of the National Institutes of Health and the CDC that works to educate the public on living healthfully with diabetes. Its webpage on *children and schools* provides access to publications and additional resources on childhood diabetes.

*American Diabetes Association (ADA)* works to prevent diabetes and protect against the consequences of diabetes by funding research, delivering diabetes services, and providing objective information to people with diabetes and the general public. The ADA’s *Safe at School Campaign* aims to ensure that all students with diabetes have safe and productive school days. Its website offers information about legal protections, school staff training and more.

*Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International (JDRF)* works to fund and support research for type 1 diabetes. The JDRF website has a [special section](http://www.jdrf.org) dedicated to providing current and credible information for adolescents with type 1 diabetes. This section provides information about sports and diabetes and about getting motivated to care for diabetes independently.

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3 Fletcher JM, Richards MP. “Diabetes’s ‘Health Shock’ To Schooling And Earning: Increased Dropout Rates And Lower Wages And Employment In Young Adults.” *Health Affairs*, 2012; 31(1): 27-34.
4 Thorpe KE 2012.
5 Thorpe KE.