The latest annual report on the nation’s health shows dramatic improvement over the past 50 years; a new comprehensive study on marriage, divorce, and cohabitation offers a long-term look at patterns in relationships; and the latest data on health insurance for children document an increase in coverage, especially under public programs. These new reports are produced by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), which monitors the nation’s health through a series of ongoing surveys and data systems.

HEALTH, UNITED STATES, 2002

Americans’ health has changed dramatically for the better over the past 50 years, with men and women both living longer, fewer babies dying in infancy, and the gap between white and black life expectancy narrowing in the past decade. In 2000, infant mortality dropped to a record low and life expectancy hit a record high, according to Health, United States, 2002, the 26th annual health report card. This 430-page edition takes an extended look at trends in fighting illness, chronic diseases, and mortality going back to 1950. The report presents the latest findings from health surveys and other sources in 147 tables and 28 graphs and charts. In addition to examining where Americans get their health care and how much it costs, the report dissects disparities in health care access and outcomes by race, ethnicity, and income.

The country has gained significant ground in fighting heart disease, stroke, and injuries. The HIV virus emerged as a major killer in the 1980s, but deaths dropped precipitously after 1995 thanks to powerful new drugs that keep the virus in check. However, new AIDS cases are still being reported, about 40,000 cases in 2000.

Among key findings of Health, United States, 2002:

- During the past half century, death rates among children and adults < age 24 were cut in half. Mortality fell by more than 40% among adults ages 25–44, fell by nearly 50% for those ages 45–64, and dropped by a third among those 65 and older.

- The 4 million babies born in 2000 enjoy the longest life expectancy in U.S. history—almost 77 years, based on preliminary figures.

- The life expectancy of a newborn boy is now 74, and for a newborn girl it is almost 80. For those born a century earlier, life expectancy was 48 for boys and 51 for girls.

- The infant mortality rate has plummeted 75% since 1950. It dropped to a record low of 6.9 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2000, down from 7.1 the year before.

- Men who turn 65 now live to 81 on average, and women who turn 65 now live to 84 on average.

- The gap in life expectancy between blacks and whites narrowed during the 1990s. The life expectancy of white babies was 5.6 years longer than that for black babies in 2000, an improvement from the 7-year gap in 1990.

- Black Americans still were dying at rates one-third higher than those for white Americans at the end of the decade. However, that was better than the 37% disparity in 1990.

- Homicide rates among young black and Hispanic males ages 15–24 dropped almost 50% in the 1990s. Homicide remains the leading cause of death for young black men and number two for young Hispanic men.

- Incidence of all cancers combined declined in the 1990s for men, but not for women.

- More than 40% of adults were smokers in 1965, compared with 23% in 2000. Those without a high school education were still almost three times as likely to smoke cigarettes as college graduates.

- Infectious disease rates have declined. The syphilis rate in 2000—2.2 cases per 100,000 people—was the lowest since national reporting began in 1941.

Deaths among children and young adults from unintentional injuries, cancer, and heart disease are down sharply. Among working-age adults, fewer are dying from unintentional injuries, heart disease, and stroke. For older Americans, the increase in life expectancy is largely due to the sharp drop in deaths from heart disease and stroke.

This report also noted that 3 in 5 adults ages 20–74 are overweight. One in four Americans is considered obese. Almost 40% engaged in no physical activity during leisure time, and women were more sedentary.
than men. One in 10 Americans ages 45–54, one in five of those 55–64, one in four of those 65–74, and one in three of those 75 and older reported being in fair or poor health.

On the spending side of the equation, the report noted that Americans spent $1.3 trillion on health care in 2000, or 13.2% of the gross domestic product, far more than any other nation.

A third of the health care dollar was spent on hospital care, about one-fifth on physicians, and almost one-tenth on prescription drugs. The cost of prescriptions leapt 15% a year from 1995–2000, faster than any other item on the health care bill.

Hospital stays keep getting shorter; just 4.9 days on average in 2000. Twenty years ago patients spent more than seven days on average in the hospital. Sixty-three percent of all surgeries now are performed as outpatient procedures, with patients sent home after a short stay in a recovery room. A decade earlier, half of all operations were on outpatients. In 1980, only 16% were done on outpatients.

Federal and state government programs—principally Medicare and Medicaid—paid 43% of all medical bills. Private insurance covered 35%, and other private sources 5%. Consumers paid 17% out of their own pockets.

More information, including a downloadable electronic version of the report, is available on the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/nchs.

**TRENDS IN PATTERNS IN MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND COHABITATION**

By age 30, three-quarters of women in the United States have been married and about half have cohabited outside of marriage, according to *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the United States.* The new study focuses not only on individual factors but also community conditions associated with long-term marriages as well as divorce and separation. Based on interviews with nearly 11,000 women 15–44 years of age for the National Survey of Family Growth, the study also examines conditions associated with cohabitation, including the impact that premarital cohabitation has on marriage and marital stability. The National Survey of Family Growth is a nationally representative survey focused on marriage, divorce, contraception, infertility, and other factors affecting pregnancy and birth rates and women’s health.

Among the findings in the report: unmarried cohabitants overall are less stable than marriages. The probability of a first marriage ending in separation or divorce within 5 years is 20%, but the probability of a premarital cohabitation breaking up within 5 years is 49%. After 10 years, the probability of a first marriage ending is 33%, compared with 62% for cohabitations. The study suggests that both cohabitations and marriages tend to last longer under certain conditions, taking into account factors such as: whether the woman was raised throughout childhood in an intact two-parent family; whether religion plays an important role in her life; whether her family income is high; and whether she lives in a community with high median family income, low male unemployment, and low poverty.

The report also shows that marriages that end do not always end in divorce; many end in separation and couples do not go through the divorce process. Separated white women are much more likely (91%) to divorce after three years than separated Hispanic women (77%) or separated black women (67%). Meanwhile the probability of remarriage within 5 years for divorced women is 54%—58% for white women, 44% for Hispanic women, and 32% for black women. However, there is also a strong probability that second marriages will end in separation or divorce (23% after 5 years and 39% after 10 years).

**HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE FOR U.S. CHILDREN IMPROVES**

The proportion of American children without health insurance declined from 13.9% in 1997 to 10.8% in 2001, but the proportion relying on public coverage rose from 21.5 to 23.4% over the same time period, according to a new CDC report. Health insurance coverage improved for the total population, with the percent uninsured dropping from 15.4 in 1997 to 14.1% in 2001. Although the percent of working age adults covered by private health insurance appears to have decreased slightly, from 74.8% in 1999 to 73.9% in 2001, that decline was offset in part by a slight increase in coverage under public plans. The latest data show that almost one-third of the Hispanic population lacked health insurance in 2001 (31.6%), compared to 17.3% for black non-Hispanics and 10.3 for white non-Hispanics.

Lack of health insurance coverage is one of the 12 health indicators covered by the Early Release Program of the National Health Interview Survey, a household interview survey conducted annually by NCHS. Results from 1997 through 2001 are now available electronically. Other indicators include influenza vaccination, pneumococcal vaccination, obesity, leisure time physical activity, health status, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, HIV testing, personal care needs,
having a usual place for health care, and failing to obtain needed medical care.

The survey also documented that adults and children were more likely in 2001 than in previous years to have a usual place for health care—86% of adults and 94% of children in 2001. However, there was also a growing number of Americans (from 4.2% in 1998 to 4.7% in 2001) who reported that they were unable to obtain needed medical care.

Other key findings show that the annual percent of older Americans who had received influenza vaccination in the previous year continued to decline, from 65.7% in 1999 to 64.3% in 2000 and 63.0% in 2001, due to the delay in influenza vaccine availability for the two recent seasons. The percent who had ever received a pneumococcal vaccination, however, has steadily increased from 42.4% in 1997 to 53.8% in 2001.

The report also shows that in 2001, 6.5% of older Americans needed the help of others with personal care needs such as eating, bathing, dressing, or getting around inside their home. Seniors identified as black non-Hispanic or Hispanic were about twice as likely as white non-Hispanic seniors to need the help of other people with such personal care needs.

The prevalence of obesity among adults continued to increase in 2001, whereas the percent of adults engaging in leisure-time physical activities remained similar from 2000 to 2001. In 2001, 22.8% of adults were current smokers, continuing a decline, and one out of 10 adults drank excessively, with men three to five times as likely as women to report excessive drinking. About one-third of American adults had ever had an HIV test. Among adults ages 18–34, men were less likely than women to have had a test. Black non-Hispanic adults were most likely to have had an HIV test. Early Release of Selected Estimates Based on Data from the 2001 National Health Interview Survey can be viewed or downloaded from the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/nchs. For more information on the survey and related data, check the survey website at www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm. CDC plans to periodically release updated findings on these and additional indicators on the Internet to track important health measures.

REFERENCES