

UPDATES FROM US HEALTH AGENCIES

Recent activity in government and non-government agencies may affect readers of *Ethnicity & Disease* and other healthcare professionals working with ethnic minority and under-served populations. Below are some current items of interest.

FROM THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON AGING (NIA)

New NIH-Supported Study Characterizes Social Networks of Family, Friends Influencing Obesity

People wondering about excessive weight gain might look to their relationships for one clue, suggests new research. The study showed that obesity spreads within social networks and that the closer the social connection — even if people live in different households many miles apart — the greater the influence on developing obesity. The study, funded by the NIA, is the first to provide a detailed picture of the social networks involved in obesity and could prove useful in developing both clinical and public health interventions for obesity.

A sedentary lifestyle and increased consumption of high-calorie foods are critical factors

in the steep rise in the prevalence of obesity, but researchers suggest that a hierarchy of influence exists among family and friends on developing obesity, in which the attitudes, behaviors, and acceptance of obesity also might play a role.

To explore whether obesity spreads from person to person within social networks, the research team gleaned weight, height, and other data from the records of 5124 Framingham Heart Study participants at up to seven time points between 1971 and 2003. In addition, they analyzed similar information from the Framingham records of these key participants'

parents, spouses, siblings, children, and close friends. Together, these individuals formed a large, intertwined social web totaling 12,067 people. The average age of key participants at the inception of the study was 38 years, with a range of 21 to 70 years.

A key participant's chances of becoming obese increased by 57% if he or she had a close friend who became obese. In same-sex friendships, a close friend's becoming obese increased a key participant's chance of becoming obese by 71%. However, no such association was found in opposite-sex friendships. The perception of friendship also was an important factor. When two people identified each other as close friends,

the key participant's risk of becoming obese increased by 171% if his or her friend became obese. In contrast, a key participant was not likely to become obese if someone claimed a close friendship with him or her but the key participant did not report the friendship.

"The rising rate of obesity threatens to reverse the decline in disability in the older population, with major implications for the healthcare system," says Richard Suzman, PhD, director of the NIA's Behavioral and Social Research Program. "This seminal study breaks important new ground in showing how social networks may amplify other factors and help account for the dramatic increase in obesity across the population."

FROM THE NATIONAL HEART, LUNG, AND BLOOD INSTITUTE (NHLBI)

Framingham Observational Study Notes Greater Incidence of Metabolic Syndrome among Adults Consuming Soft Drinks

Middle-aged adults who drank more than one soft drink daily, either diet or regular, have a >40% greater rate of either having or developing metabolic syndrome, a cluster of conditions that increase the risk for

heart disease, according to new data from the NHLBI.

"Other studies have shown that the extra calories and sugar in soft drinks contribute to weight gain and therefore heart disease risk," said Elizabeth G.

Nabel, MD, director of NHLBI. "This study echoes those findings by extending the link to all soft drinks and metabolic syndrome."

While the authors acknowledge that the increased risk of metabolic syndrome associated with high-calorie, high-sugar regular soft drinks might be expected, the similar risk found

among those drinking diet sodas is more challenging to understand, they say. It is worth noting that dietary patterns are similar across drinkers of both regular and diet soft drinks.

"Although our study adjusted for lifestyle factors, it is known that people who regularly drink soft drinks — even diet sodas — are also known to eat foods that

are higher in calories and fat, and get less physical activity," said Ramachandran Vasan, MD, professor of medicine at Boston University School of Medicine and senior author of the paper.

Data were collected in two ways, via a physician-adminis-

tered questionnaire that captured average daily of consumption of 12-ounce soft drinks, and a self-administered food frequency questionnaire that captured the frequency of diet vs regular soft drink intake. Both questionnaires were re-

corded during study visits scheduled in 1987-1991 and 1995-1998 and accounted for nearly 9000 person observations.

"Our results point to the importance of long-term observational studies such as the

Framingham Heart Study, which allow us to take a closer look at how aspects of diet are interrelated with health risks," said Caroline Fox, MD, medical officer for the Framingham Heart Study and study co-author.

FROM THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON AGING (NIA)

NIHSeniorHealth.gov Offers Tips on How to Talk with Your Doctor

How do you talk about a sensitive subject with your doctor? What if you forget to ask an important question? What if you feel rushed during your visit? How can you get the most out of your visit with your healthcare provider? Being able to communicate openly, comfortably, and assertively with your doctor can help you make good health decisions and stay well, but some older people shy away from this approach and hesitate to ask questions or take the doctor's time.

The best patient-doctor relationships are more of a partnership, with both sides taking responsibility for good commu-

nication. To guide older patients in speaking with their doctors, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) offers Talking with Your Doctor, a newly released topic on NIHSeniorHealth.gov, a website developed by NIH with the needs of older people in mind. The NIHSeniorHealth.gov website is a joint effort of the NIA and the National Library of Medicine (NLM).

"Most people know that communicating with their doctor is important to their health care, especially as they age and are more likely to have health conditions and treatments to discuss," says Judith A. Salerno, MD, NIA deputy director. "The

key is to know how to have that conversation."

Older adults can turn to this newest feature on the NIHSeniorHealth website for information on managing conversations with their doctor. How to prepare for a doctor visit, what to ask, what information to provide, and how to understand what the doctor says are among the many helpful tips older adults can find on the site.

One of the fastest growing age groups using the Internet, older Americans increasingly turn to websites for health information. In fact, 68% of wired seniors surf for health and medical information when they go online.

NIHSeniorHealth.gov is based on the latest research on

cognition and aging. It features short, easy-to-read segments of information that can be accessed in a variety of formats, including various large-print type sizes, open-captioned videos, and an audio version. The site also links to MedlinePlus (<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/>), the National Library of Medicine's premier, more-detailed site for consumer health information.

NIA leads the federal effort supporting and conducting research on aging and the health and well-being of older people. NLM, the world's largest library of the health sciences, creates and sponsors web-based health information resources for the public and professionals.