



May is National Stroke Awareness

Every 40 seconds, someone in the United States has a stroke. Strokes occur when blood flow to the brain is blocked by a clot. The brain cells in the immediate area then begin to die because they are not receiving the oxygen and nutrients they need to stay alive.

Approximately 128,000 people die from strokes each year, and strokes are one of the leading causes of long-term disability in the United States. Common risk factors include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, diabetes and obesity. While strokes most often happen to the elderly, 25 percent of all strokes occur in those under the age of 60.

Each May, health organizations across the United States work to raise awareness of strokes and their symptoms. Common stroke symptoms include facial drooping, weakness on one side of the body and speech difficulty.

In addition to being able to recognize stroke symptoms, it is important to know what you can do reduce your chances of having a stroke. The infographic below outlines some of the steps you can take to start improving your health today.

Ways to Prevent a Stroke

Keep your blood pressure under control.

Get your cholesterol checked regularly.

Stop smoking.

Maintain a healthy weight.

Exercise regularly.

Physicians Urged to Think Twice Before Prescribing Opioids

Since 2000, the rate of deaths from opioid overdoses has increased 200 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC estimates that approximately 40 Americans die each day from opioid overdoses.

Recognizing this growing problem, the CDC recently released new guidelines urging physicians to avoid prescribing opioid painkillers for chronic pain, noting the risks of these drugs outweigh the benefits for most patients. These guidelines are aimed at primary care physicians, who prescribe nearly half of opioids, and do not apply to physicians treating patients with cancer or end-of-life care.

Instead of opioids, the CDC encourages physicians to prescribe other treatments like exercise, physical therapy and meditation. Studies have found that these methods often work better than opioids for the vast majority of people with chronic back pain.

In addition, in March, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it will now be requiring a “black box” warning on painkillers highlighting the risk of abuse, addiction, overdose and death. These warnings will be for fast-acting or immediate-release versions of opioids, such as oxycodone and hydrocodone.

The “black box” warning aims to teach doctors about the risks of prescribing opioids. The FDA also encourages pharmacists to provide patients with a medication guide for opioids that clearly explains the risks of these drugs, so patients can make more informed choices about their health.

Only 3 Percent of Americans Live a Healthy Lifestyle

A study by researchers at Oregon State University found that the overwhelming majority of Americans do not live a healthy lifestyle. The study measured how people followed four healthy characteristics: moderate exercise, a good diet, not smoking and having a recommended body fat percentage.

The target for exercise was 150 minutes of moderate activity each week. Blood samples confirmed whether a person was a smoker, and body fat was measured using X-ray technology. A good diet consisted of consuming foods suggested by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The study found that 78 percent of adults did not smoke, 38 percent ate a good diet, 10 percent had a healthy body fat percentage, and 46 percent exercised regularly. However, less than 3 percent of adults achieved **all four** measures.

These measures are important because they reflect a lower risk for heart disease, cancer and Type 2 diabetes. This study indicates that Americans still have a way to go in adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Supreme Court Hears Contraceptive Coverage Case

On March 23, 2016, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Zubik v. Burwell*, a group of cases in which religious nonprofits are challenging a government-designed workaround to the Affordable Care Act (ACA) requirement that employers cover birth control for their employees.

As a result of the oral arguments, the Supreme Court ordered the parties to file supplemental briefs for the Supreme Court to review. The supplemental briefs are supposed to address whether and how contraceptive coverage may be obtained by employees through their insurance companies in a way that does not require any involvement of the employers.

The Supreme Court's order is in response to the religious organizations' argument that the contraceptive coverage mandate violates the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). The argument is based on the organizations' position that the accommodations approach requires them to facilitate providing contraceptive coverage, which violates their beliefs.

As a possible solution, the Supreme Court suggested that the nonprofits could tell their insurers that they don't want their plans to include contraception coverage when they first contract with them. The insurers would then directly notify the nonprofits' employees that they could obtain free contraception coverage through the insurer, even though the employers do not wish to offer it in their plans.

The Supreme Court hopes to receive additional suggestions from the parties through the supplemental briefs.

It is not a standard practice for the Supreme Court to ask for supplemental briefs after hearing oral arguments. This request could indicate concern that a decision now would result in a 4-4 split. A split vote would defer the law to the states, which could lead to inconsistency and confusion.

The briefs are due on or before April 12, 2016, and responses to the briefs by opposing parties are due on or before April 20, 2016.

Phase 2 of HIPAA Audit Program

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has launched the second phase of its HIPAA audit program, which focuses on compliance with HIPAA's Privacy, Security and Breach Notification Rules.

This phase affects covered entities and business associates. If an audit reveals a serious compliance issue, HHS' Office for Civil Rights (OCR) may investigate. The entities selected for an audit will have 10 business days to submit the requested information, and another 10 business days to respond to draft findings.

Covered entities and business associates should still prepare for a possible audit by reviewing their compliance with HIPAA's Privacy, Security and Breach Notification Rules.

Communications from OCR will be sent via email and may be incorrectly classified as spam, so OCR expects covered entities and business associates to check their spam folders for emails from OSOCRAudit@hhs.gov. An entity that does not respond to OCR may still be selected for an audit or be subject to a compliance review.

DID YOU KNOW?

A tweak to the tax code could allow employers to pay back employees' student debt. Two bills making their way through Congress (H.R. 1713 and H.R. 4363) could give companies tax incentives for helping employees repay their student loans.

Currently, if employees receive money from their employers to pay off student debt, it is considered taxable income. The bills aim to expand the tax code, allowing up to \$5,250 per year to be treated as nontaxable income.

The average college graduate has \$30,000 in debt. Since many young people prioritize paying off debt over saving for retirement, this could be a benefit that employers can use to attract talent. Although the bills are not expected to be passed during an election year, supporters are cautiously optimistic.

