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Most Primary Care Physicians Lack Resources to Fight Obesity, Surveys Find

By James Arvantes
3/30/2010

Most primary care physicians lack the resources to appropriately counsel their patients about weight management, creating a situation in which many patients who are overweight or obese are not receiving the right type of information about how to manage their condition. That's according to two separate but companion surveys commissioned and released by the Strategies to Overcome and Prevent, or STOP, Obesity Alliance.

Nearly 90 percent of primary care physicians believe it is their responsibility to help patients who are overweight or obese lose weight, according to research conducted by Harris Interactive that found 72 percent of 290 primary care physicians surveyed said no one in their practice had been trained to deal with weight-related issues.

The survey shows that even if primary care physicians had more time to discuss weight with their patients, many would "still be missing needed information about weight-loss tools and existing programs," said Richard Carmona, M.D., a former U.S. surgeon general and the health and wellness chair of the STOP Obesity Alliance.

"It is time to fill that information gap," he added.

Most patients, meanwhile, recognize the effect of excess weight on health, according to another Harris Interactive survey of 1,002 adults. The majority of adults who are considered overweight or obese based on body mass index, or BMI, calculations take personal responsibility for losing weight, the survey found. But only 39 percent of those with a BMI of 30 or above said a health professional told them that they were obese.

Among adults who were informed by a health professional that they were obese, about nine of 10 said their health care professional recommended they lose weight. But about one in three of these individuals said their physician never discussed how to lose weight.

The findings from both surveys also indicate that physicians and patients agree that establishing a 5 to 10 percent goal for weight loss would benefit patients' overall health. More than 90 percent of physicians and 80 percent of patients who consider themselves overweight agree that the risk of disease is reduced a great deal or somewhat after a 5 to 10 percent weight loss.

Primary care physicians should check patient height and weight at every office visit, said Carmona. One of the overriding goals is to use this type of information as a tool to "drive your patients toward a better health status," he said.

But, he adds, physicians have to track progress. "Is this actually something (physicians) note on the chart," said Carmona, "or do they say, 'You gained five pounds since last year, and I notice your blood pressure is a little higher and your lipids are a little higher.'"

The STOP Obesity Alliance also recently released a white paper (14-page PDF; About PDFs) highlighting approaches to help address obesity within primary care. The paper stemmed from an expert roundtable organized by the Alliance that focused on adult primary care treatment and the management of obesity.

The paper describes obesity as a "complex condition caused by a combination of factors with no 'one solution fits all' answer." The complexity of the issue and the treatment of the condition make care coordination and integration essential, according to the white paper.

"Often patients are best or more successfully treated by simultaneous interventions from health professionals in many fields," says the paper. It outlines five areas that could lead to significant advancements in patient outcomes in the area of obesity, including

- monitoring weight, health indicators and risk;
- assessing patient motivation;
- defining success;
- increasing integration and care coordination; and
- implementing electronic health records.

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