

Self-Managing Your Health

Q: Are there programs to help manage chronic conditions?

A: Yes. Millions of American suffer from chronic conditions which account for 75% of America's medical care costs. According to one recent survey of 1,000 people age 44 and older, the U.S. health care system is not meeting the needs of this vulnerable population.

More than two-thirds of the people with chronic conditions like heart disease, arthritis, hypertension, emphysema, macular degeneration, obesity, mental health issues and diabetes, had two or more of such conditions, and 20% had 4 or more chronic conditions. One in four people surveyed said they had delayed seeking health care or not filled prescription medications because of financial costs. More than 70% said they were frequently or sometimes living in pain, and 65% said they were under significant stress. Half the people surveyed reported that were depressed. Many people feel that they are not getting the support they need from our health care system.

Almost 60% of those surveyed said their doctor has not asked whether they have help to manage their problems, and 45% admitted that they rarely or never receive referrals to resources such as classes, counselors, dieticians and health educators. Nearly 2 out of 5 (38%) admitted they don't have the money it takes to do things that will improve their health. The percentage of those without enough money for health care rose to 63% for Latinos, 58% for African Americans, 65% for people with annual household incomes below \$20,000, and 59% of people with four or more chronic conditions.

The group that sponsored this survey, the National Council On Aging, says that the federal government needs to make investments in community-based programs, and in primary care and hospital settings to ensure team-based, coordinated care. NCOA says doctors and nurses should refer their patients to "self-care" programs, which help them develop the skills and confidence to manage their health and advocate for the help and support they need.

There are trainers in Massachusetts who can help individuals learn more about chronic condition self-management. Group workshops are offered which focus on self care: teaching people how to do problem-solving decision-making and how to improve communication skills needed by people with chronic conditions in order to manage their own health outside of a doctor's office.

Older people with chronic conditions can use self-care programs to better manage their health. These programs can result in significant improvements in energy, health status, social activities, less fatigue and lower use of the hospital and/or emergency room.

In Massachusetts, chronic disease self-management workshops take place for 2 1/2 hours once a week for six consecutive weeks. Anyone who has a diagnosis that impacts their physical or emotional health can learn new ways to deal with pain and fatigue, understand nutrition and exercise options, communicate more effectively with health care professionals and become a stronger advocate for their own care. For more information or to find a self-management session in your area contact the Healthy Aging Programs Coordinator 1-800-892-0890.

