



## CHRONIC DISEASES

Chronic diseases are diseases of long duration and generally slow progression. Examples include heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and arthritis. These conditions are among the most common, costly and preventable of all health problems in the United States. Yet they are the leading causes of death and premature death.

- 7 out of 10 deaths among Americans each year are from chronic diseases. Heart disease, cancer and stroke account for more than 50% of all deaths each year. (1)

Four modifiable health risk behaviors—lack of physical activity, poor nutrition, tobacco use, and excessive alcohol consumption—are responsible for much of the illness, suffering, and early death related to chronic diseases.

The percent of women with chronic disease increases with age. The 2007 LA County Health Survey asked respondents if they had ever been told they had any of the following 5 chronic conditions: depression, diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, and hypertension. Eighty-three percent of women 65 and older reported at least one of these chronic conditions, and 53% reported having been diagnosed with 2-5 of them. (2)

### Disparities

Chronic diseases have a higher incidence rate among certain populations. African American women 65 and older reported the highest rate of being diagnosed with one or more chronic disease at 93%, followed by Latinas at 85%, white women at 82%, and Asian/Pacific Islander women at 80%. (2)

Although aging is associated with greater risk for chronic conditions, much of this risk can be lowered through behavior and lifestyle changes.

### Public Health and Community Interventions

Behavior is one factor influencing chronic disease but social and environmental factors also play an important role. As Baby Boomers impact the health care system and community services, interventions become increasingly important.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health received a two-year grant from the U.S. Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Communities Putting Prevention to Work Initiative* for public health efforts addressing chronic disease in the county. The projects are focusing on making policy, systems, and environmental changes that positively impact an individual's access to safe places to exercise and ability to purchase nutritional foods, and an individual's right to smoke-free living, working, and social spaces. (3)

The Healthways/Blue Zones Vitality City Initiative is an example of a community intervention currently being implemented in a local partnership with the Beach Cities Health District.

“Blue Zones” is the term given to places in the world where people live the longest, reaching age 100 at rates 10 times greater than in the United States. The lifestyles of

all Blue Zone residents share specific characteristics including daily walks; having a purpose; taking time each day to nap, pray, meditate, or enjoy a happy hour; eating a primarily plant-based diet heavy on beans, nuts and green plants; drinking 2 glasses of wine a day; putting family first; belonging to a faith-based community; and having healthy-minded, supportive friends.

The Healthways/Blue Zones Vitality City Initiative engages citizens and develops leaders and innovation strategies based on local research to motivate residents to adopt and maintain healthier lifestyles – to live longer, better. (4)

Policies that support safe, walkable neighborhoods, clean air, access to nutritious, affordable food, and culturally competent preventive services are necessary to make a healthy choice the easy choice.

By maintaining a healthy lifestyle, women can drastically reduce their risk for chronic disease and live well as they age.

### **Prevention Matters!**

#### References

1. <http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/overview/index.htm>
2. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, Healthy Women: Wellness Across the Life Span, LA Health; October 2010
3. <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/arra.htm>
4. <http://www.bluezones.com/programs/vitality-cities/>