

The Shaky Economy: Is it Changing the Way People Take Care of Their Health?

BLOOMFIELD, Conn., October 08, 2008 - Faced with high gasoline prices, rising food costs, a roller-coaster stock market and rising unemployment, most Americans (90 percent) say they 're worried about the economy. No big surprise there, but is the uncertain economy affecting the way Americans take care of their health?

According to recent Cigna [surveys](#) , about one-third of Americans say yes, the economy has changed the way they take care of themselves. Of those, 55 percent report taking better care of their health by exercising, eating healthier or getting regular check-ups and screenings, while 41 percent say they are taking worse care. ¹

Among those who are taking worse care of themselves, more than one-third (35 percent) say they 're not going to the doctor regularly or at all, while 17 percent say they 're taking their medications less often or not at all. Ten percent say they can 't afford to eat properly or are eating less healthy foods.

" With a faltering economy that 's causing most Americans to pay closer attention to their wallets, it 's more important than ever for people to understand the value their health plan offers and make the most of the benefits that may be available to them, " says Charles Smith, M.D., chief medical officer for Cigna's health solutions organization. " For example, in many plans preventive care is free or very low cost, and as a physician I would recommend that people use these benefits.

" Health plans offer many services that can help people maintain and improve their health and save on health care expenses, such as a 24-hour nurse line, price comparisons for health care services, home delivery of medications, or an employee assistance program that people can call to discuss stress they may be feeling about the economy or other matters, " says Dr. Smith. " Now - during open enrollment - is when many people are deciding which health plan they will pick for 2009. It 's important for people to compare health plan options and select a plan that 's right for them. "

According to the Cigna survey, Americans want help. Two-thirds or more say that certain health services provided by a health plan would be helpful: a Web site showing pharmacy price comparisons (78 percent); discounts for weight loss programs and fitness centers (75 percent); the ability to talk to a nurse 24 hours a day (74 percent); access to an employee assistance program (67 percent). However, the survey revealed significant gaps - from around 30 to more than 60 percentage points - between the health services people say would be useful and people 's awareness of whether or not their health plan offers these services.

Most people surveyed say they agree that eating a healthy diet (92 percent) and exercising regularly (91 percent) are crucial to safeguarding one 's health. When asked how today 's economy might affect certain activities over the next 12 months, 75 percent said they would be more likely to eat at home rather than dine out; about two-thirds said they would be more likely to take better care of their health, eat healthier, and exercise; and 47 percent said they would be more likely to get regular checkups or screenings over the next 12 months.

The survey underscores that people already make the link between health and economic well-being, with most agreeing that healthy behaviors such as exercise and eating right can lead to a better and more prosperous life. Ninety-three percent say such behaviors would help them enjoy life more and improve their energy, while 91 percent say these behaviors would help them live longer, and 85 percent say healthy living would help them take better care of their families. Seventy-eight percent say exercise and healthy eating would help them save money in the long run, while 54 percent say these behaviors would help them earn more money in the long run. And 77 percent say that exercising and eating right would make them more productive at work.

" These are very significant findings, " says Dr. Smith. " The fact that most Americans equate healthy behaviors with a satisfying, prosperous and productive life reveals a huge opportunity for physicians, health educators and health coaches to help people put these beliefs into action. "

Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Americans say that their health is a priority, while another 30 percent say they have good intentions and think they should be doing more to safeguard their health or need some help.

So what ' s getting in the way? Perceptions about time and money. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) said they believe healthy foods cost more than unhealthy foods and 49 percent said that being healthy is expensive. Forty-four percent said that healthy meals take more time to prepare, while 36 percent said they are more difficult to prepare than less healthy alternatives.

" Eating healthy doesn ' t have to be expensive, and many healthy meals and snacks are quick and easy to prepare, " says Kim Hohol, an Arizona-based registered dietician for Cigna. Hohol suggests some quick and easy [healthy recipes and tips for preparing nutritious meals on a budget](#) .

Here are more tips from Cigna for [saving on health care costs](#) and making health plan [enrollment](#) easier.

About the Survey

The survey on health and the economy, conducted by TSC, a division of Yankelovich, Inc., consisted of telephone interviews with 1,004 individuals 18 years of age or older, living in private households in the continental United States. These interviews took place Sept. 12 - 15, 2008. Because of the unfolding financial crisis that has heightened feelings of uncertainty about the economy, TSC conducted additional interviews with 1,004 individuals 18 years of age or older, living in private households in the continental United States. These interviews took place Oct. 2 - 5, 2008. Data are weighted by age, gender, geographic region, and race to ensure reliable and accurate representation of the population. The sampling error for this study is +/- 3 percent.

About Cigna

Cigna (NYSE:CI), a global health service company, is dedicated to helping people improve their health, well-being and security. Cigna Corporation's operating subsidiaries provide an integrated suite of medical, dental, behavioral health, pharmacy and vision care benefits, as well as group life, accident and disability insurance, to approximately 47 million people throughout the United States and around the world. To learn more about Cigna, visit www.cigna.com .

1 "Health & the Economy, " prepared for Cigna by TSC, a division of Yankelovich, Inc., September/October 2008.