Study suggests walking programs may help reduce health care costs for people with diabetes

SAN DIEGO, CA – A study by researchers from the University of Michigan Department of Family Medicine and the Veterans Affairs Ann Arbor Center for Clinical Management Research found an association between participation in a walking program and a reduction in out-of-pocket health care expenses for people with diabetes. Walking programs using pedometers help people become more physically active by getting more steps each day. These types of programs improve daily physical activity among people with diabetes.

“In general, people with diabetes face higher health care costs than people without diabetes, since diabetes management includes medical costs from daily blood sugar monitoring equipment to regular vision and foot assessments,” said Mona AuYoung, who will be presenting study findings at the Society of Behavioral Medicine Annual Meeting in San Diego during a paper session (titled “Can a Pedometer-Based Walking Program Lower Health Care Costs Among Adults with Type 2 Diabetes?”) scheduled for 3pm PT on March 31.

Considering the trend in rising health care costs, the research team assessed the impact of a walking program on health care costs for people with diabetes. The research team examined step count data for 7,594 Blue Cross Blue Care Network (BCN) enrollees who participated in a walking program (Walkingspree) in 2010. Participants were eligible to join Walkingspree if their BMI was in the obese category. Individuals could potentially save an estimated 20% of their out-of-pocket expenses by uploading their step counts at least once every 30 days to the Walkingspree website and averaging at least 5,000 daily steps every three months. If they did not meet this requirement, they could not stay in the program and their deductible would increase to $5000. The researchers were able to compare the change in total annual health care costs for the year before and after starting the program.

Key research findings included:

- Every additional 100 daily steps taken by participants was related to an average individual savings of $9.07.

- On average, individuals without diabetes experienced greater total cost reductions compared to those with diabetes or diabetes with complications.
Among individuals who averaged at least 5,000 daily steps, the average expected total change in annual health care costs was $872.67 for people with diabetes and $2491.88 for people with diabetes with complications. Although there is an expected increase in health care costs for the average person with diabetes, this increase is relatively smaller for those who averaged more daily steps.

Even though people with diabetes have greater health care costs, increasing daily steps may help slow the rate of costs increases over time.

These findings will be presented at a paper session (titled “Can a Pedometer-Based Walking Program Lower Health Care Costs Among Adults with Type 2 Diabetes?”) scheduled for 3pm PT on March 31 during the Society of Behavioral Medicine’s 2017 Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions in San Diego. The authors report no financial or other conflicts of interest.

The Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) is a 2,200-member organization of scientific researchers, clinicians and educators. They study interactions among behavior, biology and the environment, and translate findings into interventions that improve the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities (www.sbm.org).

The University of Michigan Health System’s Department of Family Medicine was founded in 1978. The research program started in 1983 and has grown to include a total of over $3.6 million in grants and a 5th place ranking by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (https://medicine.umich.edu/dept/family-medicine)

The Veterans Affairs Ann Arbor Center for Clinical Management Research (VA CCMR) is a Health Services Research and Development Center of Innovation in Ann Arbor, MI. It is staffed by clinicians and scientists from both the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System and the University of Michigan (https://www.annarbor.hsrdr.research.va.gov/).

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