



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Health Care Access in Your Community

Latinas are very resourceful when it comes to taking care of their health, and they have to be because, for many, the lack of access to health care and health care insurance is very real in their lives. The unfortunate reality is that sometimes they have to treat themselves for whatever ailment is bothering them, without having an opportunity to consult a health care provider. This lack of access can lead Latinas to resort to practices that may threaten their health instead of providing a cure.

Sometimes, this may be taking a simple painkiller. Other times, listening to a friend's or relative's advice about what to take to feel better is a common practice among Latinas. You probably also know someone who has medicine shipped by a relative from their native country so that they can have a stash of medicine they can take in case something strikes. Since medicine can be bought without prescription in some countries, this allows people to purchase all kinds of medicine, from over-the-counter medicines to antibiotics. Perhaps, this is a common practice in your home as well.

Self-prescribing medication or being treated by someone who is not a certified health care provider can complicate illnesses and sometimes become life threatening. When it comes to taking care of your health, there are ways to put your resourcefulness to good use by practicing good health habits.

Practicing prevention and using the resources available in your community is what Mirna Elizabeth Dizelos, a pharmacist in Wheaton, Maryland recommends. "We have customers who come in with the packaging of medicine they got from their country looking for the equivalent here," she explains. Since medicine cannot be sold without prescription, the pharmacy's staff has a list of local doctors who speak Spanish to recommend that the customers visit a doctor to receive proper treatment. About 90 percent of the pharmacy's customers are Hispanic, which could represent a challenge to any pharmacy.

Ms. Dizelos' pharmacy, however, makes sure that all its staff members speak Spanish. The pharmacy also offers an array of health literature on topics such as healthy eating and keeping cholesterol in check.

Many Latinas would appreciate having such a resource in their community, and the good news is that there are many resources available to you. Given that most people have limited money to pay for health care access, and a good number of people lack health insurance, learning more about what services are available in your community is a good investment of your time. All you have to do is some initial exploration.

### **Mapping Out a Plan**

To take advantage of the best medical services available to you in your community, you must have a plan. First, try to learn how many clinics are available, such as government-sponsored clinics, community clinics, and hospital clinics. Make a list and find out whether they are taking new patients and whether you qualify for the services they offer. Perhaps you may qualify for some services in one clinic and other services in another. If you have time, you may even want to pay a visit to talk with one of the staff members to learn more about what they offer.

### **Did you know?**

- Almost all states and cities have special programs and screenings available to uninsured people.
- Local hospitals, health departments, and clinics often sponsor free community health fairs.
- There are also many traveling health screening services such as mammovans that offer mammograms and go to many different locations to make it easier to access these services.
- Neighborhood or school-based clinics usually provide basic health services to uninsured adults and children at a low cost.
- Dental schools often offer reduced rate services. Neighborhood grocery stores or supermarkets frequently have screenings for diabetes or offer seasonal low-cost flu shots.
- All hospitals have some money under the Hill-Burton Act to provide care to individuals with no health insurance.
- Every state has a program to provide eligible children 18 years and younger with free or low-cost health insurance. This may be an option if you have health insurance through your job, but have a low income and cannot afford it for your children. To learn more, call Insure Kids Now Program at 1-877-KIDS-NOW.

### **You Know Your Body Best**

You are your own best source of information about how your body is feeling. Sometimes you can rely on your own knowledge to know how you're feeling, but there are times when you need help. You may not be feeling well, but you just can't exactly pinpoint what is wrong. When it comes to getting treatment, the best choice is to see a health care provider. They have seen all kinds of cases and can help you find treatment right away for whatever ails you. While you may have your own ideas of how to cure an ailment, it is important to remember that nothing replaces the advice of a health care provider.

## **Practicing Good Health**

Your health is precious and must always be cared for well. Although you may have a hectic schedule, it is important to practice good health habits.

- Have a physical exam, including a Pap smear, every year. Schedule it ahead of time so that you can plan to go to your appointments well in advance. Never skip this appointment.
- Have a dental cleaning twice a year. Even if you have to pay for them, having regular cleanings will save you thousands of dollars in dental bills.
- If you feel ill, don't wait for symptoms to get worse. Make an appointment as soon as any symptoms start to appear.
- If you have to have follow-up visits to pick up test results, or to check your progress after taking medications, or to do additional tests, it is important to do so. Don't skip this important step.
- If you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant, make sure to begin prenatal care right away. It is important to start prenatal care at the beginning of your pregnancy.
- Don't self-prescribe medications. Each body is different and what is good for one person may cause adverse reactions in others.
- Don't share medications.
- Follow the doctor's instructions when taking medications. It is especially important to finish the prescribed round of antibiotics or other types of medications prescribed by your doctor.
- Read a lot about how to practice preventive health and how to stay healthy. To request free information, in English and Spanish, call the toll-free number 1-800-994-WOMAN. If you prefer, you can gather a group of women to read information aloud. This may be a fun way for everyone to be informed at the same time.

Ms. Dizelos says that women should be particularly careful to make their follow-up visits to their health care provider. Many times, women don't come back to see the doctor after having a round of tests or after finishing their medication, she says. Some women assume that the doctor will call them if one of the tests comes back positive, but that isn't always the case

since the staff at the clinic have many patients and may rely on the patient to check back with them.

All women can get on a path to better health by practicing good health habits. Today is your chance to start. For additional information on health care access and resources for low or no-cost health services, contact:

- National Women's Health Information Center, Office on Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <http://www.4woman.gov/>, 1-800-994-WOMAN
- For free or low-cost mammogram and pap test, call 1-888-842-6355 or visit <http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/contacts.htm>
- WISEWOMAN (Well-Integrated Screening and Evaluation for Women Across the Nation). Program for low-income, under insured and uninsured women aged 40-64 years with chronic disease risk factor screening, lifestyle intervention, and referral services, call 1-888-CDC-4NRG, (1-888-232-4674), <http://www.cdc.gov/wisewoman/>
- For information on your state's program to provide free or low-cost health insurance for eligible children 18 years or younger. Insure Kids Now Program, call 1-877-KIDS-NOW, <http://www.insurekidsnow.gov/>
- Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Information Center. Resources and referrals on health care services for low-income, the uninsured and those with special health care needs call toll-free at 1-888-ASK-HRSA, <http://www.ask.hrsa.gov/>
- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, call, 1-800-950-6264, <http://www.nami.org>
- Center for Medicaid and Medicare. Information on getting medical coverage for low income and elderly, as well as health insurance for children, call 410-786-3000, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/medicaid>, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/medicare>, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/schip>.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."*