



May 2008

## Diabetes and the Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine

### The Role of Health Care Affordability

The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has been growing rapidly in the U.S. in recent years. The proportion of adults reporting the use of at least one CAM therapy during the previous year increased from 33.8 percent in 1990 to 42.1 percent in 1997. Data from the 2002 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) revealed that close to two-thirds of U.S. adults had used at least one CAM therapy during the previous year. A recent study using 2002 NHIS data showed that about one-half of all adults with diabetes were CAM users. The main reasons for the rising popularity of CAM range from the actual/perceived inadequacies of conventional treatments to the desire for more autonomy in treatment decisions. Interestingly, CAM use is rising while at the same time conventional medicine has become less affordable. The purpose of this study is to analyze the relation between the affordability of conventional health care and the use of CAM by adults with diabetes. The study was conducted by José A. Pagán and Jesús Tanguma (The University of Texas-Pan American).

The 2002 NHIS is a nationally representative survey of the civilian noninstitutionalized U.S. population. The survey includes demographic, socioeconomic, health, and health care utilization information on a sample of 31,044 adults. The 2002 NHIS included a CAM supplement with detailed information

on the use of 17 CAM therapies. The final sample included 2,142 adults who had been told by a doctor or other health care professional that they had diabetes. The authors focused on the use of at least 1 CAM therapy and on the individual use of 10 different CAM modalities. They only studied CAM modalities used by at least 1 percent of adults with diabetes in the sample (i.e., prayer and spiritual healing, herbal treatments, relaxation, chiropractic care, yoga/tai chi/qigong, massage, special diets, megavitamins, homeopathy, and acupuncture).

Seventy percent of adults with diabetes used at least one CAM modality within the past year. CAM utilization rates were particularly high for prayer (61.34 percent), herbal treatments (15.09 percent), relaxation techniques (11.79 percent), and chiropractic care (6.57 percent). Except for megavitamins, CAM utilization rates were higher for adults with diabetes that delayed or did not get needed medical care because of cost than for those reporting no delays. The differences in CAM utilization rates associated with delays in getting conventional medical care were statistically significant for the use of at least one CAM modality (77.04 vs. 69.44 percent): prayer (70.56 vs. 59.89 percent), herbal treatments (19.86 vs. 14.34 percent), relaxation techniques (18.69 vs. 10.70 percent), and acupuncture (2.97 vs. 1.07 percent).



Adults with diabetes who delayed or did not get needed conventional medical care because of cost were more likely to report the use of at least one CAM modality within the past year compared with those reporting no cost-related difficulties in receiving care. These differences were present for 9 of 10 studied CAM therapies, and they were particularly important for prayer, herbal treatments, and relaxation techniques.

The results from this study suggest that when conventional health care becomes unaffordable, adults with diabetes resort to CAM to meet their unmet health care needs. An interesting finding is that education was positively related to the use of most CAM modalities. This suggests that CAM may be an integral component of diabetes management for those with better adherence to treatment regimes. Close to 89 percent of CAM users with diabetes reported that CAM had been important in maintaining their health compared with 79 percent of CAM users without diabetes. Approximately 52 percent of CAM users with diabetes had told their doctors about their use of CAM compared with 39 percent of CAM users without diabetes.

Several years of rising health care costs are likely to have forced many adults with diabetes to either delay or postpone health care or to resort to CAM. This should be a cause for concern because the clinical effectiveness of many CAM therapies favored by people with diabetes have not been fully established. Diabetes is a chronic health condition that requires careful management and appropriate access to the health care system to prevent related complications. As the use of CAM continues to grow because of rising costs, it is important that physicians are aware about the use of CAM by their patients to avoid potential risks.

*IPHP Research Brief 08-05 is based on excerpts/summary from the article: José A. Pagán and Jesús Tanguma (2007). "Health Care Affordability and Complementary and Alternative Medicine Utilization by Adults with Diabetes," Diabetes Care, 30(8), 2030-2031.*