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Health a Challenge for Hispanic Immigrants

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Millions of Hispanics come to America looking for jobs and educations, but remaining here seems to be bad for their health.

The longer Hispanics are here, the more likely they are to become obese, to develop diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. And Hispanics born here have even higher rates of those illnesses, a new government report shows.

The analysis of immigrants' health by the federal Centers for Disease Control comes on the heels of a report calling for more educational programs for Hispanics, who are expected to increase to nearly one-fourth of the country's population in coming years.

"Failure to close Hispanics' education and language gap risks compromising their ability to both contribute to and share in national prosperity," cautions the study by the National Research Council, an arm of the National Academy of Sciences.

Marta Tienda, a sociology professor at Princeton University and head of the panel that wrote the National Academies report, said Hispanics are scattering across the nation and "transforming their new destinations even as we evolve as a nation."

"We are in the midst of the Hispanic moment," she said at a briefing. But, she added, there are two ominous trends for Hispanics - worsening health status and increased risk of family disruption.

The immigrants report, also released Wednesday, promptly documented her health concerns.

It found that 22.0 percent of Hispanics who have been in the country five years or more are obese, compared to 16.1 percent who have been here for less than five years.

High blood pressure climbs from 13.4 percent for newer arrivals to 19.8 percent for those here longer. As they stay longer than five years, diabetes rates rise from 6.9 percent to 7.5 percent and heart disease increases from 3.5 percent to 5.4 percent.

And Hispanic immigrants are among those least likely to have health insurance.

Among Hispanics born in this country, 29.8 percent are obese, 24.5 percent report high blood pressure, 10.8 percent are diabetic and 7.6 percent have heart disease.

Among the native-born U.S. population overall, 22.9 percent are obese, 24.3 percent have high blood pressure, 6.1 percent are diabetic and 7.6 percent have heart disease.



The one positive note, smoking declines from 15.3 percent to 13.8 percent among Hispanics here more than five years. Some 20.1 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics smoke, as do 24.0 percent of the overall population.

Hispanics are a diverse group, ranging from families that have resided in this country since the days of the earliest Spanish colonies to the millions of recent immigrants.

And that causes problems in drawing broad conclusions, Stephen J. Trejo of the University of Texas noted. For example, lack of education is a problem for many Hispanics, especially Mexicans, but Cubans have very high rates of education, he said.

The most recent estimates from the Census Bureau show 40.5 million Hispanics in a U.S. population of 285.7 million in 2004. The bureau estimates that immigration and natural increases are adding 1.5 million Hispanics annually, a growth rate that will make them nearly 25 percent of the population by 2050.

The key question for the future, the report says, is whether being Hispanic will evolve into a symbolic identity, as has happened with other groups such as Americans of Italian, Polish, German and Irish descent, "or whether it will become an enduring marker of disadvantaged minority group status."

Most immigrant communities become ethnic groups within three generations as a result of intermarriage with other groups, improved ability to speak English, residence in integrated neighborhoods and improved economic status.

Intermarriage with others is rising among U.S.-born Hispanics, the report said, and Spanish fluency is eroding the longer people are in this country and across generations.

Areas densely populated by Hispanics create the false impression that the United States is becoming a bilingual nation, the report states, and in reality this is a temporary phenomenon because of large numbers of recent immigrants.

The grandchildren of the current immigrants will most likely speak mainly English, the report said.

Online Info:

National Research Council: <http://www.national-academies.org>

National Center for Health Statistics: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs>