



Health News Digest, August 2023

Info You Can Use



Studies show antidepressants' risks might outweigh benefits

Antidepressants are medications intended to reduce the symptoms of depression and reduce the chances of attempting suicide.

Unfortunately, as depression starts to lift, patients who previously felt too helpless to commit suicide may feel well enough to try. **A**

new analysis of a wide range of studies on antidepressants found that the drugs were not as effective as patients have been told. The results showed that the patients who respond the most and the least to placebos also tend not to benefit from antidepressants – in other words, the placebo effect is similar to the effect of antidepressants for many patients. In addition, pregnant women who take specific antidepressants are more likely to give birth to babies with birth defects of the heart, digestive system, and lungs. Read our updated article [here](#) before deciding if antidepressants are right for you.

Sugar-sweetened beverage taxes help improve health habits

Sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) taxes increase the price of drinks made with added sugar, with the goal of reducing consumption. These beverages include sodas, sports drinks, energy drinks, bottled or canned coffee drinks, and tea beverages. **Studies across the country have shown that in locations where these taxes are added, there is a decrease in the number of these drinks purchased.** They have also shown that some people purchased healthier drinks, such as milk, water, and fresh juice instead of the taxed beverages. Taxed beverages in lower-income communities reduced sales significantly, generating long-term health benefits for residents. The SSB tax revenue has been used to increase high-quality preschool education in some low-income neighborhoods, so that's an added benefit! Read our updated article [here](#).



Feeling down? New interactive websites can help!

Are you feeling down but don't have the money or desire to see a therapist?

There are effective, online options that don't require any face-to face interaction and are much cheaper than other treatments or medications. Some are free or almost free! [Moodgym](#) is an interactive website that helps you improve your mood by

teaching and exercising skills based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy focuses on changing how people think about themselves and how they behave, and it is considered the most effective therapy for most depression.** Research shows that Moodgym is effective, and a new study published in *JAMA Psychiatry* also shows the benefits of online CBT for depression and anxiety. To learn more, including a young woman's first-hand experience with Moodgym, read [here](#).

We're In the News

Questions remain about new drug for hot flashes

Veozah was recently approved by FDA to help menopausal women by lowering the number of daily hot flashes. But **NCHR President Dr. Diana Zuckerman tells a reporter that Veozah's lowering the number of hot flashes might not be as helpful as the drug maker claims:** "Having six hot flashes a day is still pretty unpleasant" instead of seven or eight. She also questioned the way the research was analyzed, and the fact that the studies weren't conducted at well-respected academic medical centers. "When somebody is paid to do a study, if they want to get paid to do another study by the same company, they will try to make sure that the results are the results that the company wants." Read the news article [here](#).



The real costs of the new Alzheimer's drug, Leqembi — and why taxpayers will foot much of the bill

The FDA granted full approval for a new Alzheimer's drug, Leqembi. Now that up to 1 million patients are eligible for Medicare coverage of Leqembi, experts estimate that **Leqembi could cost U.S. taxpayers \$82,500 per patient per year, even though there are questions about whether the tiny benefit outweighs the substantial risks.** That's why Medicare will only cover the cost of Leqembi for patients who enter a registry that will gather needed information to make sure the drug is safe and effective. **CBS News reported that a letter, spearheaded by NCHR, signed by more than two dozen policy experts, urged Medicare to ensure that data from any and all Leqembi patient registries should be available for Medicare, FDA, and independent researchers to scientifically analyze.** That's important to ensure the public has an accurate understanding of Leqembi's safety. To read the news article, click [here](#), and to read the letter from policy experts, click [here](#).



Biden Cracks Down on 'Junk' Health Insurance Policies

The Biden administration recently proposed restricting short-term private health insurance plans, derisively known



as Junk Health insurance. Unlike the regular health insurance policies that must provide comprehensive coverage, junk plans can exclude pre-existing conditions, limit the number of medical visits, and deny much of the coverage that is required through the Affordable Care Act. **In other words, they are only inexpensive if you don't get sick.** They were intended to be short-term (3-6 months) for emergency coverage, but the Trump

Administration allowed them to last for 3 years instead. Dr. Zuckerman explained to a reporter that **“These plans do not provide the 10 essential health benefits required by the ACA...People claim they want to have a choice, but what we have observed is that due to misleading marketing, many customers do not fully understand what they are purchasing.”**

U.S. Mammogram Update Sparks Concern

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) is a government funded group of experts that makes screening recommendations. It is finalizing its recommendations to drop the age for women to start routine mammograms from 50 to 40 years old, but to keep them scheduled every other year instead of annually.

NCHR told USPSTF that dropping the age to 40 does not take into consideration data showing that mammograms are often inaccurate for young women, and that Black women are the only racial group likely to benefit from starting mammograms at age 40. NCHR told *Medscape Today* that the USPSTF recommendation of age 40 should apply only to higher-than-average risk women, including Black women. Read the full story [here](#).

We're Speaking Out for You



NCHR Public Comment on HHS Draft Framework to support and accelerate smoking cessation

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released a draft framework to support smoking cessation efforts, to better determine what works and for whom. In response to their request for Public Comments, NCHR recommended improvements, such as **evaluating how age, race,**

and other demographic differences affect the safety and effectiveness of different smoking cessation strategies. Read our comment [here](#).

NCHR Comments to FDA about decentralized clinical trials for medical products

Most clinical trials are conducted at major medical centers. **Decentralized trials are intended to make participation in clinical trials easier for patients in underserved or rural communities, by recruiting patients to participate online or through local doctors.** In response to the FDA's request for Public Comments, NCHR pointed out that online participation in clinical trials would not necessarily benefit low income and rural communities because they may have limited access to the best digital technology. Read our comment [here](#).

Should Medicare pay for new medical devices that are not proven to work?

Dr. Zuckerman spoke at a meeting of the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) supporting the goals of their new pilot program to improve communication between Medicare and companies making devices that the FDA designates as “Breakthrough.” **Breakthrough devices are considered innovative but do not have to be proven to work.** She pointed out that CMS and FDA have different standards for coverage and should follow them. She **urged Medicare to require companies to provide evidence that the devices will benefit Medicare patients -- to “hold firm to its standard for coverage based on scientific evidence that all medical products are proven to be reasonable and necessary for Medicare patients.”** That is necessary for Medicare to be available and affordable for years to come. Read her testimony [here](#).



NCHR Comments on whether “Generally Accepted Scientific Knowledge” is good enough for FDA approval

As a way to make it easier for companies to get their new products approved, **FDA proposed that “Generally Accepted Scientific Knowledge” (GASK) could replace research evidence for the safety and efficacy of a new drug.** In our response to the request for Public Comments, NCHR urged that GASK should *not* be the sole source of evidence and that research is needed to supplement GASK. If FDA allows GASK to be the primary form of evidence, drug companies could get their products approved without sufficient evidence. You can read our comment [here](#).



NCHR Comments on the FDA Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategies (REMS) impact on patient safety

REMS are designed to mitigate the known risk of medications, but they are often voluntary and ineffective. A good example is the voluntary program aimed at training physicians to cautiously prescribe opioids; most doctors didn't take the training or started the brief online course but didn't finish it. FDA's proposed changes involve Third Party vendors that are paid to implement and evaluate REMS programs. **NCHR pointed out that changes to REMS can cause significant disruptions, reducing their already limited safeguards if these changes are not properly tested.** We also advocated for increased transparency to make evaluations of REMS programs publicly available, so all of us will know if these efforts to reduce risks are achieving that goal. Read our comment [here](#).

News You Can Use

Weight loss drugs - important new information



With all the hype about new weight loss drugs, it's difficult to know what is fact and what is fiction. For example, a study found that Wegovy can reduce the risk of heart attack, stroke, or heart-related death by up to 20%, but that statistic can be misleading because it is a relative risk. **Since the risk of heart attack, stroke or death was about 8% for those not taking Wegovy, a 20% reduction reduces that to 6.4% -- so it is really a**

reduction of only 1.6%. In addition, these results have only included patients who did not have diabetes but did have a previous history of heart disease. There is also evidence that these drugs can cause stomach paralysis and other serious side effects, including potentially fatal complications during surgery. We'll keep you posted as more information becomes available.

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Did you know that artificial turf and rubber playground surfaces contain chemicals that can cause attention problems, obesity, early puberty, asthma, and cancer? Are your children or grandchildren getting exposed when they play? Follow us [@safe.to.play](https://www.instagram.com/safe.to.play)

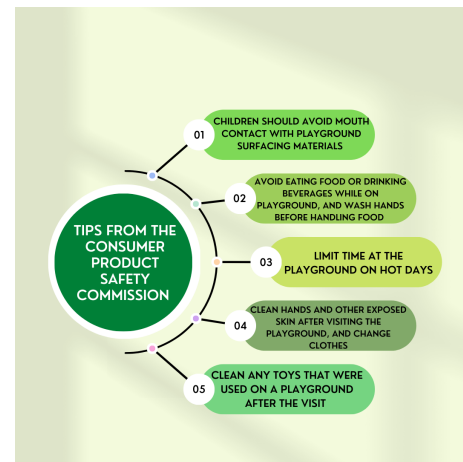


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