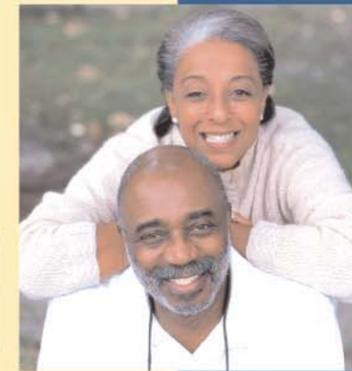


The 2005 Surgeon General's Call to Action  
**To Improve the Health and Wellness  
of Persons with Disabilities**



what it means to  
**you**



## About This Surgeon General's Call to Action

The Surgeon General is the nation's top public health officer. The President of the United States appoints the Surgeon General to help protect and promote the health of the nation.

The Surgeon General provides to the American people the best scientific information available on how to improve health and reduce risk of illness and injury.

When a health topic needs special attention, the Surgeon General issues a call to action to the nation. The recently published *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Improve the Health and Wellness of Persons with Disabilities* highlights disability as a major public health issue.

### About This People's Piece

The purpose of this "People's Piece" is to provide in simple language the same basic information found in the larger *Call to Action* and to improve everyone's knowledge about the health and wellness of people with disabilities.

The Surgeon General believes that when people have information about a public health issue, they are better able to take action to improve their health and wellness and that of their families and their communities.

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## What Is Disability?

Disability has been defined in many ways. In general, a disability is a feature of the body, mind, or senses that can affect a person's daily life.

### Many Americans experience disability first hand.

- Some people are born with a disability.
- Some people get hurt or sick and have a disability as a result.
- Some people develop a disability as they age.
- Some people have a disability that lasts a short time. Other people have a disability that lasts a lifetime.

Today, over 54 million—or 1 in 5—people living in the United States have at least one disability. Based on what we know about disability, the reality is that you or someone you care about will have a disability at some point.

That is why the Surgeon General wants everyone to know that disability can affect any of us.

### ***Fast Fact:***

**The chance of having a disability goes up with age, from less than 10% for people 15 years of age or younger, to almost 75% for people 80 or older. With good health habits and access to health care, many disabilities can be delayed or even prevented.**



# Who Are People with Disabilities?

Anyone of any age can have a disability. People of all races and ethnicities can have disabilities. People with disabilities live throughout the United States, in towns, cities, and rural areas.

People with disabilities go to school and attend places of worship. They also vote, marry, have children, work, and play. To do all these things, people with disabilities need health care and health programs for the same reasons anyone else does—to stay well, active, and a part of the community.

## Anyone can have a disability –

- ▶ An infant can be born with hearing loss.
- ▶ A child can become paralyzed by an injury from a car crash.
- ▶ A young adult can have depression or another mental illness.
- ▶ A woman in her early 30s can have multiple sclerosis.
- ▶ A man in midlife can develop type 2 diabetes.
- ▶ An older adult can lose her sight from glaucoma.

Different kinds of disabilities affect people in different ways. And the same disability can affect each person differently.

## Disabilities by Age Group



## You Can Do a Lot to Improve the Health and Wellness of People with Disabilities.

For instance, you can:

- ▶ See the whole person, not just the disability.
- ▶ Speak *directly* with the person with a disability, rather than through a third party.
- ▶ Speak with adults as adults, and children as children.
- ▶ *Ask* the person with a disability if he or she needs any help. Do not assume help is needed.
- ▶ Be aware and patient of the extra time it might take a person with a disability to speak or act.
- ▶ Respect what a person with a disability *can* do. See the *ability* in disability.
- ▶ Understand that not having access to work, school, health care, or fun things to do can cause more problems than a disability itself.
- ▶ Be the person who makes a difference.

# People with Disabilities Can Lead Long, Healthy Lives

People with disabilities need health care and health programs for the same reasons anyone else does—to stay well, active, and a part of the community.

*Having a disability  
does not mean  
you can't be healthy.*

Being healthy means the same thing for all of us—getting and staying well so we can lead full, active lives. That means having the tools and information to make healthy choices, and knowing the risk factors for illness. For people with disabilities, it also means knowing that problems related to a disability can be treated. These problems can include pain, depression, and a greater risk for certain illnesses. To be healthy, people with

disabilities require health care that meets their needs as a whole person, not just as a person with a disability.

People with or without disabilities can stay healthy by learning about and living healthy lifestyles.



## TIPS *for Leading a Long and Healthy Life*

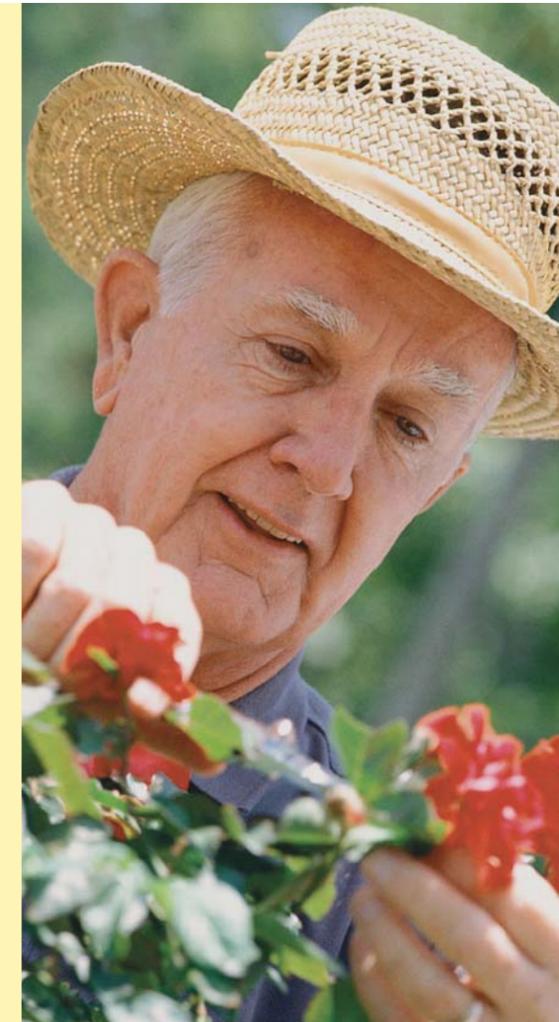
It's never too late to form healthy habits. Here are some tips to get you started:

- Eat healthy foods in healthy portions.
- Be physically active every day.
- Don't get too much sun.
- Get regular checkups.
- Don't smoke or use illegal drugs.
- Use medicines wisely.
- If you drink alcohol, drink it in moderation.
- Stay in touch with family and friends.
- If you need help, talk with your health care professional.

## *What You Can Do*

There are also many things you can do to make sure you are getting the best possible health care:

- Know your body, how you feel when you're well and when you're not.
- Talk openly with your health care professional about your concerns.
- Find out who the best health care professionals are in your area to meet your needs.
- Check to be sure you can get into your health care professional's office and that he or she has the staff and equipment you need.
- Think through your concerns before you visit your health care professional.
- Bring your health records with you.
- Take a friend with you, if you're concerned you might not remember all your questions and all the answers.
- Get it in writing. Write down, or have someone write down for you, what is said by the health care professional.
- Ask for help finding more information through materials like brochures, or at specific webpages on the Internet.



# Choosing a Healthy Lifestyle

The benefits of good health are obvious. If you feel better, you look better. You're more open to life and you can enjoy whatever comes your way. Good health lets you learn, work, and play—whether or not you have a disability.

*With good health, people with disabilities can work, learn, and be active in all areas of life.*

Although people with disabilities sometimes have a harder time getting and staying healthy than people without disabilities, there are things we can all do to get and stay healthy.



## ***Fast Fact:***

**People with disabilities are twice as likely to be physically inactive as people without disabilities. As a result, they are less likely to stay heart healthy and to maintain strong muscles and bones.**

## **TIPS** *for Getting Physically Fit*

To be healthy, all adults should be physically active 30 minutes a day at least 5 days each week; all children should be active for 60 minutes a day, at least 5 days each week.

- Set physical activity goals that you can reach.
- Track what you do.
- Reward yourself when you meet your goals.
- Seek support from your friends and family members. Ask them to join you in your activities.
- Don't give up. If you miss a day, don't quit. Just start again.



## **You Are What You Eat**

To help stick to a healthy diet, you can:

- Keep healthy snack foods on hand.
- Limit foods you can't say "no" to.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Separate eating from other activities.
- Plan your meals and snacks.
- Avoid fried foods. Try to eat foods that have been baked, steamed, roasted, or broiled.
- Enjoy fruit for dessert.

## **A** *personal story:*

"For some years, I could not stand up or stretch my arms above my head. I had to use a walker. At 77, my wife and I started using a fitness club regularly. Now, at 80, I can again walk upright and stretch my arms over my head. It's made a difference in my life, like being able to put the dishes in cupboards."

# Health Care Professionals Are Responsible for Treating the Whole Person, Not Just the Disability

Sometimes health care professionals and their staffs can have some of the same wrong ideas about people with disabilities as the general public.

Some people with disabilities have reported that health care professionals have focused on their disabilities rather than on the health problems that brought them to the providers. *Usually, they are not the same thing.* Often, it is not easy for people with disabilities to find someone who understands this.

There could be many reasons why this occurs, including a lack of proper training. Whatever the reason, the result is often limited or incomplete treatment.

We all should expect to get the right health care.

*Health care professionals can improve the health and wellness of people with disabilities by meeting the needs of the whole person.*



## A personal story:

“I had a doctor’s appointment and the nurses moved other patients ahead of me. They thought it would take more time with me because all they saw was my wheelchair. I could have had a common cold.”

## What Health Care Professionals Can Do

As a health care professional, the Surgeon General has treated people with disabilities, and calls on all fellow health care professionals to:

- ▶ Give each patient—including people with disabilities—the information needed to live a long and healthy life.
- ▶ Listen and respond to the patient’s health concerns. Give each patient the information needed to prevent or treat a health concern—even if the patient does not ask for it. As a health expert, you should offer the information.
- ▶ Communicate clearly and directly with the patient. If your patient does not understand your questions or instructions, repeat what you have said, use other words, or find another way to provide the information.
- ▶ Take the time needed to meet the patient’s health care needs.



## Fast Fact:

Among nonelderly people with disabilities, 25% reported they had difficulty finding a health care professional who understood their disability. Many training and continuing education programs for health care professionals are now focusing on training them to understand disabilities.

# Getting Needed Care and Services

Sometimes, we take things for granted—like being able to open a door, climb stairs, fill out a form, or see or hear someone. For people with disabilities, getting health care can be difficult because of lack of access.

*People with disabilities must be able to get the care and services they need to help them be healthy.*

Access can include parking spaces close to entrances, well-placed ramps or curb cuts, and doors that are wide and easy to open so that people with disabilities can get into buildings. Once inside, people with disabilities need access to counters that are low enough to reach, print that is large enough to read, and equipment that is easy to use.

## A personal story:

When Jim was 3 months old, his mother was told he had cystic fibrosis. His doctor asked Jim's mother where she wanted Jim to be in 20 years. Looking ahead, she told the doctor she wanted Jim to go to college. Working as a team, Jim's doctor and mother began to plan for his future. Jim learned early that he needed to be involved in his own health care. With support from family, school, and health care professionals, Jim took on more and more responsibility for his own health. He also learned to take care of himself by exercising, eating right, and avoiding alcohol and tobacco.

Today, Jim is 24, married, working, and buying a home. He believes he has been able to enjoy a full life with—not in spite of—his disability, thanks in large part to a doctor who saw and treated him as a person with a future, and not just as a person with a disability.

# Challenges for People with Disabilities

People with disabilities face many challenges, including:

- Mobility
- Accessibility
- Social barriers
- Communication

## Access Checklist

Offices, parks, health care facilities, schools, or any other public spaces should be built to meet the needs of all of the people who will use the space. Health care professionals should be able to communicate with all of the people who see them. This means making sure that:

- Parking spaces are close to entrances.
- Front entrances have ramps and curb cuts.
- Doors, inside and out, are wide and easy to open.
- Accessible routes connect all features and service areas.
- Floor spaces are free of equipment and other barriers.
- Counters and service windows are low enough for everyone to reach.
- Restrooms and dressing rooms are accessible.
- Alarm systems can be seen *and* heard.
- Staff and health care professionals can use or access sign language.
- Print materials and signs are in large print for people with low vision.
- Raised lettering and Braille are used on signs, such as those on elevators.



The *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Improve the Health and Wellness of Persons with Disabilities* was developed to help expand knowledge, understanding, and action by a broad range of people and groups. Each of us has a role to play. We can get out the message that, with good health, people with disabilities can work, learn, and enjoy long, active lives.

While disabilities are as different as the people who have them, the challenges and opportunities for people with disabilities often are similar.

All of us can and should make the effort to ensure that every person with a disability has the chance to live life to the fullest. If you accept that one person can make a difference, imagine what all of us working together can do.

## References for People's Piece

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*The data, facts, and suggestions given here come from the following sources:*

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*Good health is necessary for people with disabilities to secure the freedom to work, learn, and engage in their families and communities.*

### **For More Information**

For more information about healthy living with a disability, have a frank discussion with your health care professional about how he or she can best meet your needs or the needs of a person in your family with a disability.

More information about the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Improve the Health and Wellness of Persons with Disabilities* can be found on Surgeon General's website at

**[www.surgeongeneral.gov](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov)**

More advice and assistance about community living for people with disabilities is available from:

Office on Disability

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

200 Independence Avenue, S.W.

Washington, D.C. 20201

Telephone: 202-401-5844

**[www.hhs.gov/od](http://www.hhs.gov/od)**



The words and images in this document serve many purposes and were designed to reach a broad audience. The text is written to promote health literacy and to engage people with disabilities, their families, advocates, and the public at large. It provides tips for action and presents accurate portrayals of individuals with disabilities engaged in daily life in their communities. Both words and pictures remind everyone that disability does not mean inability.

Copies of this booklet and the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Improve the Health and Wellness of Persons with Disabilities* can be downloaded from both of the websites noted. To order copies by mail, please contact the Office on Disability.