



THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20201

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Over the past 100 years, our investment in research and technology has led to unprecedented improvements in the lives of Americans. Life expectancy in the United States is at an all time high. Advances in medical treatment and care have dramatically reduced infant and childhood mortality and deaths from infectious diseases, trauma, and other acute medical emergencies. As a result of medical progress, individuals with chronic diseases are enjoying longer, more independent lives. Yet despite these achievements, complex chronic health problems persist in challenging us.

For example, the percentage of Americans who are obese and overweight is at an all-time high. Obesity is a risk factor for other chronic conditions such as diabetes and some cancers, including cancers of the breast, colon, kidney, esophagus and endometrium. Along with the rise in obesity, we have seen a parallel increase in the incidence of type 2 diabetes. Yet, keeping to a healthy weight requires a healthy energy balance. While enhancing the health and well-being of Americans, technology has also had a major impact on our lifestyles. In general, labor-saving devices such as escalators, remote controls, self-propelled lawn mowers, electric garage openers, and moving walkways in airports have decreased the need for physical exertion for many Americans. At the same time, for most Americans, food is plentiful, with a wide variety of convenience foods at our fingertips, which may encourage overeating. In fact, Americans are consuming more calories than they did 30 years ago. Thus, maintaining a healthy weight becomes more difficult in the current environment where a few extra calories a day can add up to a significant weight gain over time.

Chronic diseases and conditions account for at least 7 of every 10 deaths in the United States and for more than 60 percent of medical care expenditures. In 2000, poor diet and physical inactivity, which contribute to obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes, accounted for 400,000 actual deaths in the U.S. Only tobacco use caused more preventable deaths (435,000). Moreover, many chronic diseases result in disability and decrease the quality of life for millions of Americans.

Much of the chronic disease burden is preventable. Some chronic health problems are related to individual choices or behaviors: for example, tobacco use, which raises the risk of chronic obstructive lung disease, heart disease and stroke. People who avoid behaviors that increase their risk for chronic diseases and adopt healthy habits can expect to live healthier and longer lives. Often small changes-- such as physical activity for 30 minutes a day-- can result in large health benefits.

In order for individuals to take action, they must have the right information to empower their lifestyle choices. A person's health literacy is critical to acquiring the knowledge and understanding of health issues to make informed decisions regarding his/her health and well-being. Appropriate and timely health messaging can aid the individual in his/her quest for health information.

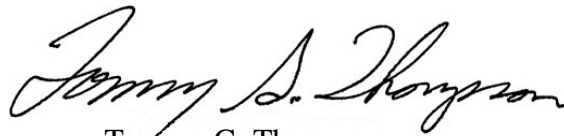
I have made improving the health of Americans through physical activity and other prevention efforts a priority of the Department of Health and Human Services. Physical activity plays an essential role in promoting good health and preventing chronic diseases and is a leading component of President's Bush's *HealthierUS* initiative launched on June 20, 2002. To advance the President's goal of helping American's live longer, better, and healthier lives, I launched *Steps to a HealthierUS* initiative in 2003. At the heart of this program lies both personal responsibility for the choices Americans make and social responsibility to ensure that policy makers support programs that foster healthy behaviors and prevent disease. The *Steps* initiative envisions a healthy, strong, U.S. population supported by a health care system in which diseases are prevented when possible, controlled when necessary, and treated when appropriate. Realizing that small changes over time can yield dramatic results, the *Steps* initiative is committed to identifying and promoting programs that encourage small behavior changes. The *Steps* program has multiple components including grants to communities, the annual prevention summit, town hall meetings, the innovation in prevention awards program and the prevention partnership program.

Motivated and guided by the goals of the *Steps* initiative, HHS agencies have "stepped-up" their efforts to promote healthy lifestyles and reduce the burden of chronic conditions. For example, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) created an Obesity Working Group to develop an action plan to address critical dimensions of the overweight and obesity problem. The FDA's report, "Calories Count", which was released in March 2004, includes recommendations to strengthen food labeling, to educate consumers about maintaining a healthy diet and weight, to encourage restaurants to provide nutrition and calorie information, and to encourage the development of foods that are healthier and low in calories. In addition, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) established an Obesity Research Task Force to develop a strategic plan for obesity research. The strategic plan, to be released later this spring, is a cohesive, multidimensional research agenda that will intensify research to better understand, prevent, and treat obesity through:

- behavioral and environmental approaches to modifying lifestyle;
- pharmacologic, surgical, and other medical approaches; and
- breaking the link between obesity and diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some forms of cancer.

However, to fully realize the benefit from technological advances, to achieve further gains in the health of Americans, and to reduce the burden of chronic disease, we must all work together to overcome obstacles and promote healthy habits. To this end, during my tenure, I have met with many individuals and hosted a series of roundtable sessions with business leaders, researchers, providers, insurers and other interested parties to discuss health promotion and disease prevention issues and strategies. I also convened several departmental workgroups on obesity, diabetes, tobacco use, health literacy and health messaging to review current programs and progress. This *Blueprint for Action* represents the product of these various efforts and outlines simple action steps to guide individuals in their quest for healthier lifestyles. It also encourages other interested parties and organizations, such as providers, employers, communities, insurers, media, schools, and government to collaborate and cooperate to overcome obstacles, to promote healthy lifestyles and reduce the burden of chronic diseases.

This *Blueprint* is just a beginning. By joining forces, resources and talents, we will be able to surmount this pressing public health challenge and enable all Americans to live longer healthier lives. I hope that this *Blueprint for Action* will inspire and encourage you to take the important steps to build a *HealthierUS*.



Tommy G. Thompson