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Programs to Help People Quit Smoking Miss Minorities

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A study by the American Cancer Society found that black and Hispanic smokers are less likely to receive advice or aids to quit smoking. The analysis of the 2005 National Health Interview Survey, published in the May issue of *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, of nearly 5,000 smokers who talked with a physician within the past year showed black and Hispanic smokers, when compared with white smokers, were less likely to be questioned about tobacco use, advised to quit, or offered smoking cessation help with either behavioral therapy or medication.

Researchers are currently examining why these disparities persist and how to overcome them. Vilma Cokkinides, PhD, strategic director of risk factor surveillance and screening at the American Cancer Society, says the disparities persisted even after factoring in socioeconomic factors, insurance coverage, and health status.

One possibility, suggests Cokkinides, is that minority smokers may smoke fewer cigarettes and be younger than white smokers, and consequently may not have chronic conditions related to smoking.

“The perception of a ‘healthy’ smoker is that they’re not exhibiting symptoms, and potentially either not prompting the patient or the provider that smoking behavior is a problem and needs to be noted and something needs to be done about it,” she says. “That’s one of the possible factors to educate patients [on] because they’re not being impacted by their behavior at the present time.”

Also, the study authors suggest beliefs, knowledge, and awareness of smoking cessation therapies among racial and ethnic groups may also play a role, but the study has no data to confirm this.

Researchers chose only to focus on whites, blacks, and Hispanics in the study because of the large number of smokers in each group, even though Native Americans/Alaska Natives have a larger percentage of smokers (34.1 percent) than either group alone. Asian Americans have one of the lowest smoking rates at 16.9 percent.

The study did report good news—an overall increase in physicians advising smokers to quit rose from 53 percent in 2000 to 61 percent in 2005. And the largest gain was found in the Hispanic population, which signals that physicians may be advising and encouraging more smokers to quit in recent years.

“I think it’s a very encouraging picture that providers are getting the message and trying to do the right thing across the board with all patients they see,” says Cokkinides.