

MORE YOUNG ADULTS ON CHOLESTEROL DRUGS

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TRENTON, N.J. -- Use of cholesterol and blood pressure medicines by young adults appears to be rising rapidly - at a faster pace than among senior citizens, according to an industry report being released Tuesday. Experts point to higher rates of obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol problems among young people. Also, doctors are getting more aggressive with preventive treatments. "This is good news, that more people in this age range are taking these medicines," said Dr. Daniel W. Jones, president of the American Heart Association. Still, he said many more people should be on the drugs that lower cholesterol or blood pressure and which have been shown to reduce risks for heart attack and stroke. The new data, from prescription benefit manager Medco Health Solutions Inc., indicate use of cholesterol-lowering drugs among people aged 20 to 44, while still low, jumped 68 percent over a six-year period. The rate rose from 2.5 percent in 2001 to just over 4 percent in 2006 among Medco customers. That means roughly 4.2 million Americans in that age group are now taking cholesterol medicines. Meanwhile, use of blood pressure medicines increased 21 percent, from about 7 percent of 20- to 44-year-olds in 2001 to over 8 percent in 2006. That translates into about 8.5 million Americans in that age group taking drugs to lower their blood pressure. "It was a surprise to us," said Dr. Robert Epstein, chief medical officer at Franklin Lakes, N.J.-based Medco. "Maybe the fact that we're seeing more young people with high cholesterol and blood pressure is indicative of the epidemic of obesity and overweight that we're seeing in this country." Among people 65 and older, use of blood pressure drugs increased only 9.5 percent and use of cholesterol drugs by 52 percent. That's because half the seniors were already taking blood pressure drugs and more than one in four were taking cholesterol drugs in 2001. Jones, dean of the University of Mississippi School of Medicine, said he has seen some increase in young adults with blood pressure or cholesterol problems, but not of the magnitude suggested by Medco's data. Dr. Howard Weintraub, the heart disease prevention expert at the American College of Cardiology, said he's "thrilled" by the dramatic increase, which he says is tied to requests from patients with "a brand new sense of urgency" and referrals from other doctors to his private practice. "If you wait until a heart attack or stroke, it's a little bit late," Weintraub said. He and Epstein both said patients with problems should first work with their doctors on lifestyle changes - more exercise, a better diet and weight loss. But Weintraub said many people need medication to achieve and

maintain the ever-lower levels of blood pressure and cholesterol that experts now recommend. However, Dr. John LaRosa, president of SUNY Downstate Medical Center, said, "particularly for young people, lifestyle change is worth a try." Once patients start taking these medicines, they usually stay with them and there are some side effects, LaRosa said. "It's amazing what (losing) five or 10 pounds will do" to reduce blood pressure and cholesterol levels, he said. Federal health statistics show that while the percentage of people with high cholesterol has dropped overall in recent years, it has risen among younger people, especially those 20 to 34 years old. Meanwhile, the prevalence of high blood pressure was flat or up slightly among those age groups; among women in the 35 to 44 age group, the rate of high blood pressure rose significantly. Medco processes prescription claims for about 60 million insured Americans. The report's findings are based on a representative sample of data from 2.5 million members.