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Prescriptions

Making Sense of the Health Care Law

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Does the Law Encourage Preventive Care?

By MICHELLE ANDREWS

Q. *What about prevention? Is there anything in the law concerning preventive medicine? — Anthony Sionni*

A. There are several prevention-related provisions in the new health law, and patient advocates are generally pleased with the new requirements. “From our perspective, it’s a big step forward,” said Stephen Finan, senior director of policy for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. “Prevention has been underfunded and largely ignored over the last 10 to 15 years.”

Starting in October, new private health plans will be required to cover preventive care and screenings that are recommended by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force at no charge, including vaccinations and cancer screenings.

Next year, seniors will be able to receive annual check-ups and recommended screenings without having to share in the costs. They’ll be offered personalized prevention plans that take their health risks into account.

There are very specific provisions for certain groups. Pregnant women who are on Medicaid must be provided smoking cessation counseling and drug therapy, for instance.

More controversially, starting in 2014 the new law will allow employers to offer premium discounts and other incentives of up to 30 percent of the cost of employees’ health coverage (and up to 50 percent in some instances) if workers participate in wellness programs and meet health targets. Current law permits discounts of only 20 percent. Patient advocates fought against the increased discounts, arguing that the higher limits might be a backdoor way of making health coverage more expensive for people with chronic conditions and other medical problems, which the new law is supposed to outlaw.

Public health gets a boost with a new Prevention and Public Health Fund, which will provide money for community-based prevention and wellness initiatives like adding more healthy options to school lunch menus or creating public parks and bike paths.

Day to day, what you may notice most, however, is that chain restaurants and vending machines will have to start listing calorie counts on their menus. Whether that prevents you

from ordering unwisely is another question entirely.

Have a question about the new health care law? Send it to health_feedback@nytimes.com.