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Upfront

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Federal government gets an "F" for tobacco control

When it comes to protecting public health through tobacco control, the U.S. federal government is failing miserably, according to the American Lung Association (ALA). In its *State of Tobacco Control 2004* report, the ALA gave the White House and Congress three F's and a D in four key areas.

For blocking legislation that would grant the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the authority to regulate tobacco products, the U.S. House of Representatives earned an F. If given such control, the FDA would have the power to regulate tobacco as a drug.

"The failure to enact FDA authority gives the tobacco industry a pass to continue to market a new wave of products, including candy-flavored cigarettes-Camel Kuauai Kolada, Camel Warm Mocha Mint, Kool Mixx Midnight Berry-that are clearly being marketed to children and teens," ALA president and CEO John L. Kirkwood said in a January press release.

For its failure to implement and fund the National Action Plan for Tobacco Cessation, Congress earned an F. The plan advocates a national tobacco quitline, nationwide media campaign, federal funding of cessation benefits, and a smokers' fund to help people who are trying to quit. Congress also received an F for failing to raise the federal excise tax on cigarettes to \$2, as recommended by the National Action Plan for Tobacco Cessation.

And finally, the federal government received a D for failing to ratify the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, an international treaty that has been ratified by 40 countries to date. The president has signed the treaty, but has not sent it to the Senate for ratification.

The ALA also rated individual states on their efforts to discourage tobacco use. States were judged on their funding for tobacco prevention and control programs, smokefree air ordinances, cigarette taxes, and youth access to tobacco products. The marks were mixed, but trends show that smokefree air laws are on the rise, as is the average state cigarette tax. Although a handful of states received high marks for limiting youth access and funding tobacco prevention programs, the majority did not.

The ALA report card comes on the heels of a report by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, which found that for every dollar states spend on tobacco prevention programs, the tobacco industry churns out more than \$23 worth of marketing. The yearly report evaluates how well states are using the proceeds from a 1998 settlement with the tobacco industry. A *Broken Promise to Our Children: The 1998 State Tobacco Settlement Six Years Later* noted that almost every state is failing to adequately support tobacco control programs.

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Secondhand smoke linked to cervical cancer

Secondhand smoke has been shown to increase the risk for heart disease and lung cancer, but new research suggests that women who live with smokers also may have increased risk of developing cervical tumors.

"An association between active cigarette smoking and cervical cancer has been noted in numerous studies, but less is known about the potential link between passive smoking and the development of cervical neoplasia," study author Anthony J. Alberg, PhD, MPH, said in a press release. "When these new data for cervical cancer are considered in light of similar results from previously published studies, our findings suggest that passive smoking may be firmly linked with cervical cancer."

Researchers at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health studied questionnaires about the household and personal smoking habits of two Maryland groups from 1963 and 1975. When they compared questionnaires from 51,173 women to the county's cancer registry, the researchers found a link between secondhand smoke and cervical tumor growth, or neoplasia. The association was stronger for the earlier cohort, with a 2.1-fold increased risk of cervical neoplasia for those women who participated in 1963, and a 1.4-fold increased risk for those who participated in 1975.

The study, published in the January 2005 issue of *Obstetrics and Gynecology*, also corroborated previous studies that had found a link between active cigarette smoking and cervical tumors. "Our study results are one more piece of evidence that should encourage smokers to quit and warn non-smokers who live with smokers to decrease their secondhand smoke exposure," Alberg said.

Cervical cancer, which afflicts 10,520 women in the United States each year, is one of the most preventable cancers with advanced screening technologies. But according to a report titled *A Call to Action: The "State" of Cervical Cancer in America*, many American women, especially those in public insurance programs, remain unscreened or under-screened for cervical cancer.

Women In Government, a bipartisan educational association for women in state government, released the report in January. "We urge state legislators, public health officials, advocates, and others to renew their efforts to prevent cervical cancer by ensuring that all women have access to the most advanced screening technologies-including both the Pap and the HPV (human papillomavirus) tests-regardless of their socioeconomic status," Women In Government chair and Michigan Senator Beverly Hammerstrom said in a press release. "We will continue to monitor state successes and highlight their progress in future reports as part of our 10-year plan to eliminate this disease."

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Zinc may help prevent oral cancers

Zinc supplements may help prevent esophageal and oral cancers in high-risk individuals, a study published in the January 5, 2005 issue of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* suggests.

Oral and esophageal cancers are associated with nutritional zinc deficiency, which increases cell proliferation in those areas and makes them more susceptible to carcinogens. Dietary zinc comes mostly from red meat and seafood, and up to 2 billion people in developing countries don't get enough zinc in their diets. About 10% of Americans have zinc-deficient diets. Meanwhile, the incidence of these cancers has been rising in recent years.

Oral and esophageal cancers are also associated with a rise in the expression of COX-2, an enzyme that is best known for its role in arthritis pain and inflammation. The enzyme has also been shown to stimulate the proliferation of cancerous cells. COX-2 overproduction helps destroy the tissue that anchors normal cells, which increases the risk for cancerous cells to develop. COX-2 overproduction has also been linked to colon, ovarian, prostate, and breast cancers.

Researchers from Thomas Jefferson University found that zinc given orally to zinc-deficient rats reversed the high expression of COX-2 in the esophagus and tongue, and reversed the development of precancerous conditions as well. These findings suggest that zinc supplements may help prevent oral or esophageal cancers, particularly in people who live in developing countries where zinc deficiency is a problem.

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A drink a day keeps mental decline away?

The negative effects of regularly drinking too much alcohol are well documented, but a study published in the January 20, 2005 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* suggests that women who drink moderately may actually lower their risk of cognitive decline.

Several studies have demonstrated alcohol's protective effects on the heart, and the study authors suggest that moderate alcohol intake might protect the brain in a similar way by increasing blood flow. Previous studies have also shown that moderate drinkers do better on cognitive tests than do non-drinkers. Many such studies have been limited, however, by inadequate sample size and control for confounding variables.

To address these shortcomings, researchers used data from the Nurses' Health Study, which began in 1976 as a long-term prospective investigation into the risk factors for major chronic diseases in women. The study enrolled 121,700 female registered nurses, then aged 30 to 55, and collected their self-reported information regarding diseases and health topics like smoking, hormone use, and menopausal status. Every two years, follow-up questionnaires were mailed to participants, with questions about diet and alcohol use added in 1980. The participating women were asked how often they had consumed certain types of alcohol, and if their alcohol intake had changed greatly in the previous decade.

In 1995, the researchers began a study of cognitive function. Researchers evaluated 12,480 participants from the Nurses' Health Study who were 70 to 81 years old, did not live in a nursing facility, and had not experienced a stroke. To avoid bias, the cognitive analyses were limited to women with stable drinking patterns.

Women in the study who consumed up to one drink per day showed less cognitive impairment and better functioning than nondrinkers. Memory and concentration tests showed that up to 15 grams per day of beer, wine, or liquor was beneficial to women's brain functioning. However, researchers were unable to draw conclusions about possible beneficial effects of more than one drink per day. Due to the low number of heavy drinkers involved, they also could not evaluate the cognitive effects of heavy alcohol intake.

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