



20 Advances to Be Thankful For ...

Life Is Getting Measurably Better for Many People Here and Abroad



News about health often focuses on the negative: scary new flu viruses, incurable diseases, dashed hopes for miracle drugs. Maybe that's because we have such high expectations that doctors and scientists can fix anything.

But amid all that bad news—not to mention the acrimony over health-care reform—it's easy to overlook how much progress has been made in recent years. Here are 20 health-care advances to give thanks for this Thanksgiving:

• Nearly 62% of U.S. adults said they were in excellent or very good health, along with 82% of their children, according to families sampled by the federal government for the [National Health Interview Survey](#), which was conducted in 2007 and released this year.

• Fewer Americans died in traffic fatalities in 2008 than in any year since 1961, and fewer were injured than in any year since 1988, when the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) began collecting injury data. One possible reason: Seat-belt use hit a record high of 84% nationally.

• [Life expectancy in the U.S.](#) reached an all-time high of 77.9 years in 2007, the latest year for which statistics are available, continuing a long upward trend. (That's 75.3 years for men and 80.4 years for women.)

• [Death rates dropped significantly](#) for eight of the 15 leading causes of death in the U.S., including cancer, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, accidents, diabetes, homicides and pneumonia, from 2006 to 2007. (Of the top 15, only deaths from chronic lower respiratory disease increased significantly.) The overall age-adjusted death rate dropped to a new low of 760.3 deaths per 100,000 people—half of what it was 60 years ago.

• [The death rate from coronary heart disease](#) dropped 34% from 1995 to 2005, though it is still the biggest single killer in the U.S. Deaths from cardiovascular disease dropped 26% over the same period. Deaths from stroke dropped 29% since 1999. Average total cholesterol in adults aged 20 to 74 dropped to 197 milligrams per deciliter in 2008 from 222 in 1962.

• [The death rate from cancer](#), the second-biggest killer, dropped 16% from 1990 to 2006. That reflects declines in deaths due to lung, prostate, stomach and colorectal cancers in men, and breast, colorectal, uterine and stomach cancers in women.

• [Nearly 40% of U.S. adults have never had a permanent tooth extracted](#) because of dental cavities or periodontal disease in 2004, the most recent data available, compared with 30% in 1994.

• [Three out of 10 U.S. schoolchildren aged 5 to 17 in 2007 did not miss a single day of school](#) because of illness or injury during the preceding 12 months.

• [Hip fractures](#)—which can rob elderly patients of their mobility forever—are down nearly 30% in the U.S. and Canada since 1985, for reasons not completely understood.

• Thanks in part to vaccines, [the rate of acute viral hepatitis A dropped 90% between 1995 and 2006, and acute viral hepatitis B dropped 88% from 1982 to 2006](#), both to record lows. Acute viral hepatitis C is down to 0.03 from 2.4 cases per 100,000 since 1992, though rates have recently plateaued.

- Thanks largely to antiretroviral drugs, [U.S. deaths from AIDS dropped 10%](#) from 2006 to 2007, the biggest decline since 1998, and they remain well below the 1995 peak. New cases of AIDS, though static in recent years, also remain well below the 1990s level. Antiretroviral drugs have also helped cut dramatically [the number of babies born with HIV in the U.S.](#); in 2006, there were 28 diagnoses of AIDS among children, down from 195 in 1999.

World-wide, more than four million people in low- and middle-income countries were receiving antiretroviral therapy for HIV/AIDS at the end of 2008, a 36% increase in one year and a 10-fold increase over five years.

- The proportion of [undernourished children world-wide under five years of age declined to 20%](#) in 2005 from 27% in 1990.

- Chalk this one up as an advance for mental health: The U.S. divorce rate dropped by one-third from 1981 to 2008, and is at its lowest level since 1970. This may be due to more couples postponing marriage or to economic constraints, as well as to couples' determination to stay together.

- From 2006 to 2008, the [median percentage of U.S. secondary schools that don't sell soda](#) rose to 64% from 38%, and those that don't sell candy or high-fat snacks rose to 64% from 46%, in the 35 states that collect data.

- Around the world, [27% fewer children died before their fifth birthday in 2007 than in 1990](#), due to greater use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets, better rehydration for diarrhea, and better access to clean water, sanitation and vaccines.

- The amount of [trans fats in packaged food has declined by about 50% since 2006](#), when the Food and Drug Administration began requiring food labels to list it. At least 13 jurisdictions, including California and New York City, have restricted trans fats in restaurant food.

- Twenty-seven countries reported a reduction of up to 50% in the number of malaria cases between 1990 and 2006.

- As of this month, 71% of the U.S. population lives under either a [state or local ban on smoking in workplaces and/or restaurants and/or bars](#), and 19 states have banned smoking in all three kinds of places. Research has found that air quality improves and heart-attack rates drop in areas that have enacted smoking bans.

- Experts have found that some of the best things you can do for your own health are simple and free: Getting adequate sleep can help you lose weight, fight infections, recall memories and think more clearly. Spending just 30 minutes a day in the sunlight to soak up vitamin D across a broad swath of the country can reduce your risk for a variety of cancers, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and many other diseases. Volunteering to help others can lower your risk for depression and heart disease, raise your self-esteem and happiness and extend your life, according to numerous studies.

- The longer you live, the happier you are likely to be. Many older adults find that happiness and emotional well-being improve with time; they learn to avoid or limit stressful situations and are less likely to let negative comments or criticism bother them than young adults, according to research presented at the American Psychological Association conference in Toronto this year.

Of course, there have been setbacks as well as many steps forward, and the gains haven't been universally shared. The full effects of the H1N1 virus are not yet known. Infant mortality remains high. Teen pregnancy is up. Obesity is rising. Organ transplants are down. The decline in cigarette smoking has stalled. But other breakthroughs loom on the horizon, including personalized cancer medicines, promising drugs for lupus and Lou Gehrig's disease, gene therapy and cancer vaccines, and tests that may one day discern small deadly cancers from larger, slower ones. Which should give us plenty more to be thankful for next year.

Write to Melinda Beck at HealthJournal@wsj.com

[“It's helpful to put everything in perspective. We should appreciate the advancements and innovation in our society that alleviate human suffering. We live like kings compared to our great grandparents.”](#)

—Tommy Butler