

This Just In...



This Just In... reports are a quick summary of new health marketing and communication research and trends. These brief “nuggets” spotlight new findings with communication practice implications for CDC and its public health partners.

Brought to you by the Strategic and Proactive Communication Branch in the Division of Communication Services, Office of the Associate Director for Communication, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A broader analysis of three years of top ten prime time television shows indicates nearly six in ten episodes featured a health storyline.

Research objective: The Kaiser Family Foundation and the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Hollywood, Health & Society examined three seasons (2004-2006) of top-ten-rated prime time scripted shows to measure the prevalence of health content on entertainment shows and to categorize the type of health content on prime time television.

Methods: To assess the frequency and type of health content found on TV, every episode of the top 10 prime time shows among 18-49 year olds for Nielsen's General Audience from the spring seasons of 2004, 2005, and 2006 were recorded and content analyzed. In the end, a total of 723 hours of television content were analyzed for the study, including 947 episodes across 33 different series.

Findings: Viewers who tuned in to the top-rated entertainment shows on TV over the past several years were treated to a wealth of storylines concerning health and health care—an average of one and a half health-related storylines per episode. Most included at least a moderate amount of educational content on the health topic (61%), and many included strong educational content (32%).

Other interesting results include:

1. An average of six out of ten episodes (59%) had at least one health storyline.
2. The most common health topic found in top-rated TV shows was an unusual illness or disease. This topic appeared more than four times as often as heart disease, five times as often as cancer, and 20 times as often as diabetes—all more prevalent medical conditions among the American population.
3. Health storylines are much more likely to focus on symptoms (65%), treatment (59%) and diagnosis (50%) than prevention (10%).
4. One in ten of the top rated shows (10%) included a storyline about access to care, such as a lack of insurance, or cutbacks in services at medical facilities.
5. Because of differences in the types of shows they watch—more comedies, fewer medical shows—African American and Hispanic audiences are exposed to fewer health storylines than are viewers overall. There were 792 health storylines in the sample of shows from Nielsen's overall top-ten shows, compared to 564 in the top-ten shows among African-Americans, and 698 in the top-ten English language shows among Hispanics.

Practice implications for health marketers and communication professionals:

These findings demonstrate that popular prime time television conveys a substantial amount of health-related information. The majority of these portrayals show characters dealing with a wide range of health issues and receiving, for the most part, quality care from physicians with whom they have favorable interactions. The fact that one in four health storylines is about a rare or unusual condition may be somewhat frustrating to health advocates hoping to educate the public on more widespread health conditions. While prime time television's fascination with obscure medical conditions may make for riveting drama, these storylines are not particularly relevant to the average American viewer. These may divert the viewing public's attention from more mundane but far more commonplace medical conditions such as heart disease, cancer, or diabetes. The relatively low incidence of storylines about these more common ailments represents a lost opportunity to alert millions of viewers to the symptoms, treatment, and prevention of the illnesses they are most likely to face. Health communicators, however, should consider taking advantage of show content when aired to promote similar prevention messages to public health audiences using other communication and program channels. In addition, health communicators could find unique and different human interest stories on the more prevalent medical conditions for television writers and producers.

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CDC holds a cooperative agreement with the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Hollywood, Health and Society to help CDC programs recommend health storylines to television writers and producers. Contact us if interested in learning more about this. **For additional information, send comments and questions to SPCBHealthMktg@cdc.gov, or contact Lynn Sokler, SPCB, at LSokler@cdc.gov.**