

Best preventive care? Get vaccines, and don't smoke

By Jeremy Olson, Star Tribune
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Jeff Wheeler, Star Tribune Anna Calcote repositioned a band aid on her son, Weston, 1, after he braved his 12-month series of shots, including the MMR vaccine, at the Children's Specialty Center at Children's Hospital in Minneapolis on Jan. 29, 2015.

Doctors giving regular checkups will get the most bang for their buck if they advise adults to quit smoking, convince teens to never start, and keep children up to date with immunizations, according to an influential report released Monday by the Bloomington-based HealthPartners Institute.

The research findings, sponsored in part by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, could influence how doctors across the country conduct thousands of regular patient visits each year.

Comparing 28 recommended preventive services, HealthPartners researchers found that tobacco counseling and pediatric immunizations outranked the others in cost-effectiveness and the potential to save lives.

While all the preventive services are valuable, the reality is that doctors can't do them all in a standard 15-minute office visit, said Dr. George Isham, a senior fellow with the institute.

"In an imperfect world, we don't always get the chance to do everything we should. It's a matter of attending to those things that are most important first," Isham said.

National health care leaders encouraged doctors to use the findings to set their own priorities; a prior study found that doctors would spend 7.4 hours per day if they tried to provide all recommended preventive services to all patients.

The study found a particularly strong impact if 90 percent of youth received tobacco prevention counseling — a huge increase from the 20 percent that actually receive it today. "Tobacco use has certainly come down over time, both among adults and youth," said Michael Maciosek, the study's lead author. "Nevertheless, it remains a huge problem compared to other health threats."

HealthPartners' first ranking of preventive services received wide notice when it came out in 2006 — at a time when rising deductibles and copays made patients more sensitive to medical bills and which services they were paying for out of pocket.