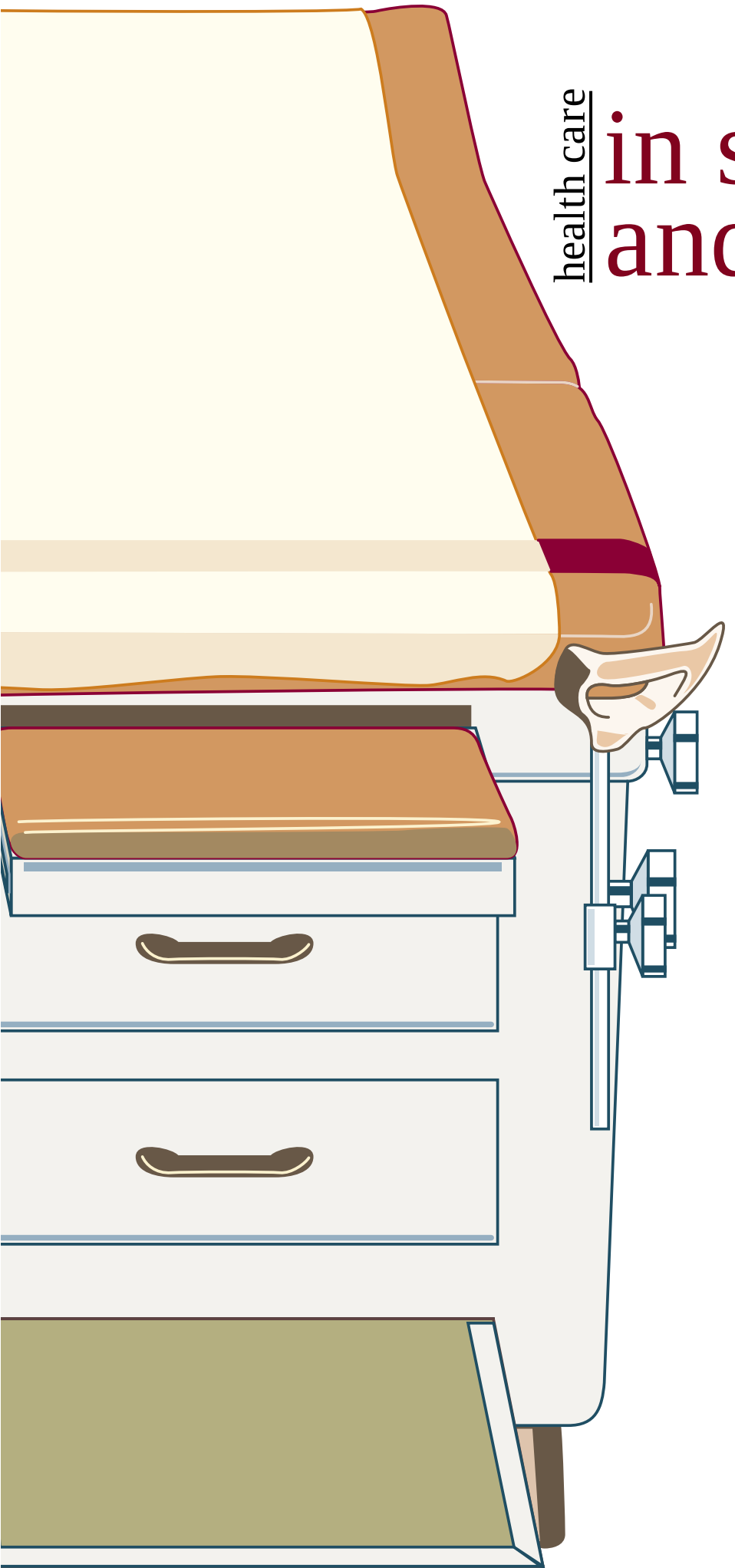


health care

in sickness and in health

Getting Better: Medical Advances Since 1980

Someday people will look back and recoil at how primitive medical care was in 1999. But for now, we can allow ourselves to marvel at the considerable number of medical advances that occurred between 1980 and 2000.

• **Non-invasive diagnostic technology** has dramatically reduced the need for exploratory surgery. CAT scans and magnetic resonance imaging are replacing the scalpel as a diagnostic tool. And by the late 1990s, there was the distinct possibility that 3-D computer imaging would make exploratory surgery even more of a rarity.

• **Minimally invasive surgical techniques** have helped to shorten recovery times, diminish the risk of infection, and reduce unnecessary suffering. Scope technology has provided surgeons with a tool for making much smaller incisions. Procedures that once required lengthy hospital stays are often now performed on an out-patient basis.

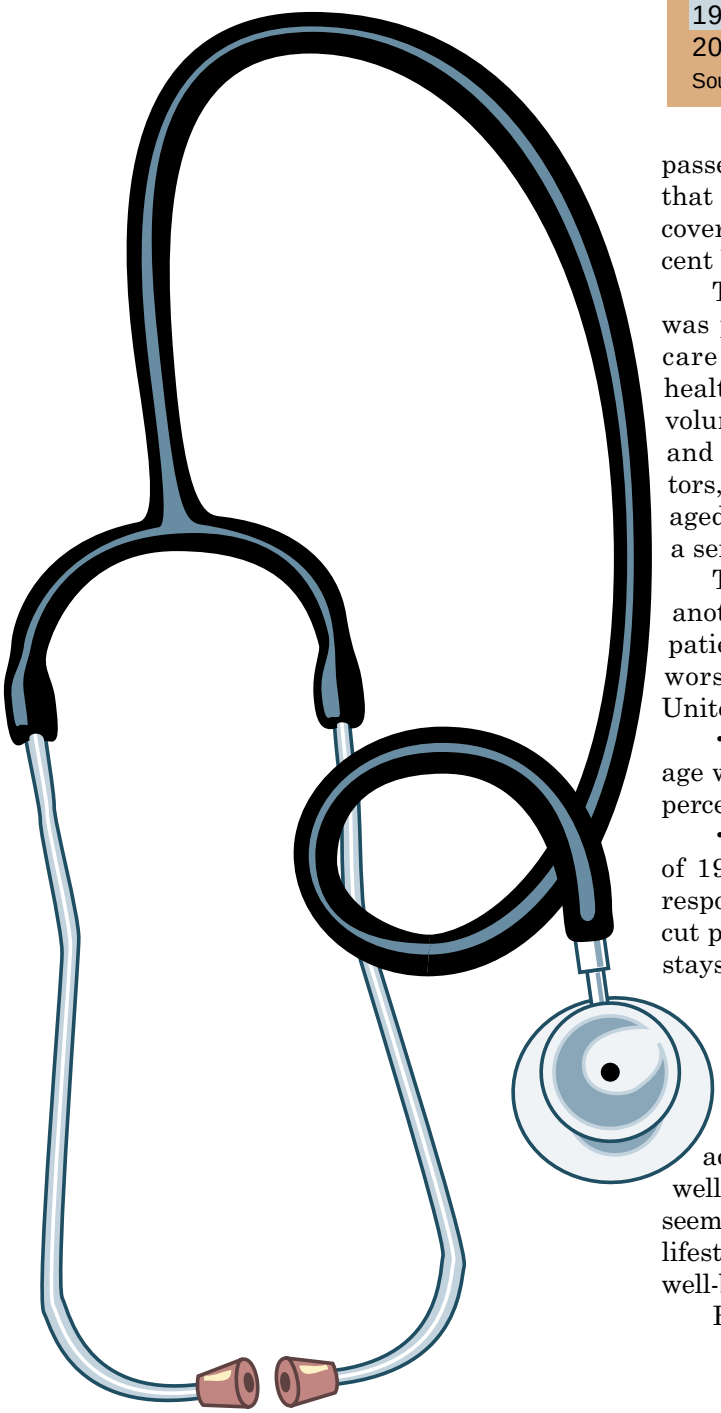
• **Pharmaceutical advances** are prolonging life and enhancing its quality. Since 1980, there have been dramatic breakthroughs in treating high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, allergies, schizophrenia, depression, and sexual dysfunction.

• **DNA mapping and gene therapy** hold out the promise of finding cures for conditions that were once thought to be incurable.

• **The AIDS mortality rate has dropped sharply**. Acquired immune deficiency syndrome, which no one had even heard of in 1980, had become one of the leading causes of death in the United States by 1990. But new treatments and

a comprehensive public health campaign significantly reduced AIDS mortality during the mid-1990s. After increasing at an average annual rate of 16 percent during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the AIDS mortality rate declined nearly 29 percent from 1995 to 1996 and almost 48 percent from 1996 to 1997.

• **Early detection and improved treatment** have helped boost the overall five-year cancer survival rate from roughly 50 percent in the early 1980s to better than 60 percent by the end of the 1990s, and the five-year survival rate for certain cancers has shown an even more dramatic increase.



A Chronic Condition: The Rising Cost of Health Care

Yet for all the gains made between 1980 and 2000, one problem has defied solution: rising costs.

Efforts to contain costs have led to a major change in health care delivery: the switch from "fee-for-service" insurance plans to managed care.

Prior to 1980, almost all health insurers operated under the "fee-for-service" model, which gave patients considerable freedom to choose a primary care physician, a specialist, or a hospital. If doctors and hospitals raised their fees, medical insurers raised their premiums. A large portion of the rising costs was passed on to employers; nearly three-quarters of the employers that offered health insurance plans in 1980 paid the full cost to cover their workers. (That number would drop below 35 percent by the mid-1990s.)

Health Care Costs and the Consumer Price Index

Index (1982–1984=100)

	CPI-U (All Urban Consumers)	Medical Care Component of CPI-U
1980	86.3	74.9
2000	172.2	260.8

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The switch to "managed care" plans during the mid-1980s was part of an overall effort to rein in rising costs. Managed care organizations — sometimes generically referred to as health maintenance organizations, or HMOs — negotiated high volume contracts with specified doctors, hospitals, pharmacies, and other health care providers. Unauthorized visits to doctors, hospitals, or other health care providers outside the managed care network were not covered by the insurance plan. In a sense, managed care executives were gatekeepers.

The success of managed care varied widely from one plan to another. Some were exceptionally well-run and offered their patients excellent care. Others fell far short. But for better or worse, HMOs had an impact on health care delivery in the United States:

• In 1980, 4 percent of those with health insurance coverage were enrolled in HMOs. By 2000, the number was up to 30 percent.

• In 1980, the average hospital stay was 7.3 days; by the end of 1999 it was down to 5.0 days. Two factors were largely responsible for the drop: (1) technological advances helped to cut patient recovery times, and (2) HMOs were limiting hospital stays in an effort to contain costs.

An Ounce of Prevention: Wellness and Lifestyle

An American born in 2000 could expect to live 76.9 years — up 3.2 years from 1980. In part, that's due to health care advances, but it's also a reflection of our increased attention to wellness and fitness. We may not always succeed, but at least we seem to be more conscious of the fact that diet, exercise, and other lifestyle changes can have a positive impact on our health and well-being.

For one thing, as the table on the next page shows, we have

changed the way we eat and drink.

Overall, we're spending a smaller portion of our disposable income on food: 10.7 percent in 1997 versus 13.4 percent in 1980. But because our lives have become so busy, we're spending nearly 40 percent of our food budget on restaurant meals and takeout. That's up from roughly 32 percent in 1980.

We're also making lifestyle changes that go beyond what we eat and drink. Fewer of us are smoking cigarettes: 24.1 percent in 1998 versus 30.1 percent in 1985. And in a trend we can trace back to the early 1980s, when everyone started wearing higher-priced sneakers and sweating to *Jane Fonda's Workout*, we're trying to stay active. In 1998, 77.6 million Americans walked for exercise, 58.2 million swam, and 46.1 million worked out on exercise equipment.

Of course, there are no statistics on how many home treadmills and rowing machines are collecting dust in the basement.

Want to Know More?

The DNA Files, based on a series distributed by National Public Radio, takes an in-depth look at genetic science. **http://www.dnafiles.org/home.html**

The National Institutes of Health web site, **http://www.nih.gov/**, and the Center for Disease Control web site, **http://www.cdc.gov**, both have lots of good information on a variety of health-related issues.

The NIH site also has a comprehensive review of the battle against AIDS, including a detailed AIDS history timeline. **http://aidshistory.nih.gov/home.html**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture site, **www.usda.gov**, has information on a variety of food-related issues, including a section on diet and nutrition. **http://www.nutrition.gov/home/index.php3**

U.S. Per Capita Food Consumption (in pounds)

	1980	1999
Red meat	126.4	117.7
Poultry	40.8	68.3
Fish and shellfish	12.4	15.2
Fresh fruits	104.8	132.5
Fresh vegetables	149.1	192.1
Yogurt (1/2 pints, excl. frozen)	4.6	9.1
Cheese	17.5	29.8
Refined sugar	83.6	67.9

U.S. Per Capita Beverage Consumption (in gallons)

	1980	1999
Whole milk	16.5	8.4
Reduced-fat, light, and skim milk	10.5	15.2
Bottled water	2.4	18.1
Coffee	26.7	25.7
Carbonated soft drinks		
Diet	5.1	11.7
Regular	29.9	39.1
Alcoholic beverages		
Beer	36.6	31.9
Wine	3.2	2.7
Distilled spirits	3.0	1.8

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001*.