

# PANEL: FREE BIRTH CONTROL

Health experts recommend no co-payments for contraceptives

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Millions of women stand to gain free access to a broad menu of birth control methods, thanks to a recommendation issued Tuesday by health experts advising the government.

An Institute of Medicine panel recommended the government require health insurance companies to cover birth control for women as preventive care, without co-payments. Contraception — along with such care as diabetes tests during pregnancy and screening for the virus that causes cervical cancer — was one of eight recommended preventive services for women.

“Unintended pregnancies carry health consequences for the mother — psychological, emotional and physical — and also consequences for the newborn,” said Dr. Linda Rosenstock, panel chairwoman and dean of public health at the University of California Los Angeles. “The overwhelming evidence was strongly supportive of the health benefit” of contraception.

A half century after the introduction of the birth control pill, the panel’s recommendations may help to usher in another revolution. Medical experts say easier access could start a shift to more reliable forms of long-acting birth control, such as implants or IUDs, which are gaining acceptance in other economically developed countries.

President Barack Obama’s health care law requires most health plans to provide standard preventive care for people of both sexes at no additional charge to patients. Women’s health recommenda-

tions were considered new and politically sensitive territory, so the nonpartisan institute was asked to examine the issue. The institute advises the government on complex matters related to medical science and health care policy.

Nonetheless, a fight over social mores is likely. Catholic bishops and other religious and social conservatives say pregnancy is a healthy condition and the

government should not require insurance coverage of drugs and other methods that prevent it. (Most health plans already cover contraception.)

Short of repealing part of the health care law, it isn’t clear what opponents can do to block the recommendations. A final decision by Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius is expected around Aug. 1.