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Community survey provides glimpse into Sarasota County's health

Did you ever wonder why some people are so much healthier than others and why some aren't as healthy as they could be? The 2010 Community Health Survey of nearly 2,000 Sarasota County residents offers a glimpse into the health of our community. This is the third in a series of similar surveys conducted over the past decade by the Community Health Improvement Partnership (CHIP). The survey explores a variety of factors influencing health and well-being, including health status, access to health care, mental health, health behaviors and social support.

Since CHIP's last community health survey in 2006, some encouraging trends have been revealed, including significant increases in the proportion of residents aware of community resources, and a decrease in depression and alcohol abuse. However, some other trends give cause for concern. Fewer residents are self-reporting that they are "very healthy," which is a strong predictor of future health outcomes. The proportion of uninsured residents in Sarasota County increased from 16 percent in 2006 to 23 percent in 2010, and not surprisingly, fewer report having a primary care physician.

The survey results show that the economic downturn in recent years is likely contributing to a poorer health status. More than one in five Sarasota County residents reported that financial stress has contributed to health problems. That number was higher for those with a household income less than \$30,000, and nearly double for those without health insurance. As stress levels increase for individuals, so do the many health complications associated with increased stress. In Sarasota County, survey results from 2006 and 2010 reveal slight increases in the number of individuals reporting high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes, and fewer respondents reported that they were "very happy."

Research shows that in a poor economy, people are more likely to cut back on preventive health care and less likely to engage in healthy behaviors. More than one in four Sarasota County survey respondents reported delaying seeing a doctor or other medical professional during the economic downturn, and nearly one in five said they cut back on preventive care. In 2006, 81 percent of respondents reported that they engaged in some form of physical activity within the last month; that number declined to 73 percent in 2010.

“We need to be aware of these trends. We have seen a rise in some health conditions that are imposing significant costs to our community – with respect to both quality of life and in real economic terms,” said Kari Ellingstad, director of the Community Health Improvement Partnership. “For example, researchers have estimated that the average additional annual costs of being obese at nearly \$5,000 for women and about \$2,600 for men. When you think about the fact that more than one in five adults in Sarasota County are obese, you begin to understand the economic toll on the community. A community that has a large proportion of people in poor health ends up expending a lot of resources to treat disease and disability, which is particularly taxing when economic times are tough.”

The survey also reveals that health status differs by income, education and ethnic background. Those earning less than \$30,000 a year were less likely to report their health status as “excellent” or “very good.” Those with a lower education level were less likely to be insured and more likely to report a diagnosis of heart disease or diabetes. When compared to Caucasians, African-Americans were twice as likely to report a diagnosis of diabetes (10 percent versus 20 percent) and less likely to report excellent or very good health (50 percent versus 33 percent).

“Everyone should have the opportunity to make the choices that allow them to live a long, healthy life, regardless of their income, education or ethnic background,” said Ellingstad.

The survey also includes questions about access to parks, playgrounds and walking trails, fresh foods and affordable health care. “The conditions in which we live, work or play have a significant impact on our health long before we ever see the doctor,” she added.

When asked what would be most helpful for a healthier lifestyle, a quarter of the respondents cited grocers or farmers markets that offer affordable fresh fruits or vegetables.

Local health officials say that even though some of these statistics seem grim, compared to many other parts of Florida, Sarasota County fares quite well. In a statewide study of health status among Florida’s 67 counties, Sarasota County ranked second for health outcomes and fourth for health status.

“This is great, but as a community, I would encourage us to raise the bar even further and strive to do better in addressing current needs and preparing for the future,” said Ellingstad.

Community health advocates say that we need to have a better understanding of how our local systems impact our health. Where people live, learn, work and play has an enormous impact on whether they stay well in the first place.

“Health starts with strong families and in neighborhoods with safe areas for walking and exercise and with access to grocery stores stocked with healthy foods,” said Sarasota County Health and Human Services Executive Director Charles “Chuck” Henry, who also was recently appointed as administrator for the Sarasota County Health Department. “Health starts in jobs that we can get to without hours of commuting and in workplaces free of unnecessary hazards. Health starts in schools that educate our children for the jobs of the 21st century so they can compete in the world economy and with schools that feed them healthy meals rather than junk foods, and that send them home safe at the end of the day.”

“And health starts in having the time and financial resources to play at the end of a hard day’s work, because unrelieved stress takes its toll on our hearts and immune systems. As we work together to improve health in Sarasota County, we need to start where health starts, not just where it ends,” Henry added.

Since 2002, a host of organizational partners, community leaders and area residents in Sarasota County have devoted energy to building a healthy community. The Community Health Improvement Partnership (CHIP) has been a catalyst for engaging communities throughout Sarasota County in these collaborative efforts.

To view the survey results in their entirety, visit the CHIP website, www.CHIP4Health.org/research. In addition to the community health survey results, the report highlights how community groups have used data for local action.

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