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Jackson County, Wisconsin

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## County residents some of the most obese, physically inactive in the state, says study

by Megan VerHelst | Reporter

Jackson County has some work to do to get residents' health on track with the rest of the state, according to a recent study by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

Out of 72 counties and the city of Milwaukee, Jackson County scored 71st in its mortality rate, coming in ahead of only two others in the state.

Jessica Athens, co-author of the Wisconsin county health rankings study and an employee at the Population Health Institute at UW, said the study is conducted each year to determine the current health status of all counties in the state based on mortality rates and self-perceptions.

"Those are both determined by a vast array of determinants, including health behaviors and socioeconomic and environmental factors," Athens said. "We're trying to look at all the different factors that contribute to these scores."

After the Population Health Institute completed a random telephone survey of residents in each county, as well as took into consideration data from the state Department of Health and other state offices, there were at least two significant health determinants that contributed to Jackson County's low mortality score.

The data showed Jackson County ranks 70th in resident obesity and physical inactivity. Other health behaviors that the county did not do well in include insufficient fruit and vegetable intake, smoking during pregnancy and motor vehicle crash-related emergency room visits.

"The county faces challenges with physical inactivity and its fruit and veggie intake," Athens said. "Both can be a contributing factor to the county's health outcome."

Christine Hovell, director of the Jackson County Department of Health, said when she saw the low mortality rank, she looked into other factors that could be contributing to the low score. In her search, she said the county is finding an increase in the number of infant deaths, as well as county residents dying at a younger age.

"Jackson County has such small population numbers that one early death can bring the numbers down quite a bit," Hovell said.

Hovell said the leading causes of death in the county are cancer, heart disease and motor vehicle accidents. She said heart disease and strokes are often caused by a poor diet, physical inactivity and obesity, establishing a correlation between the county's scores on the health study and her findings.

While she is not sure why the county has problems with these particular health behaviors, Hovell said the rural area of the county and the poor economic status of some of its residents could contribute to some not finding and maintaining appropriate health care.

Hovell said that Jackson County, as well as other counties in the state, could start to see better health outcomes if there was more money put aside at the state level for public health. She said compared to other states, Wisconsin does not put any money aside for public health initiatives and ranks fourth worst in the nation.

"If there was some stable funding put towards public health, we could put it towards prevention activity," Hovell said. "It's concerning that we don't have the education within the community, and I'm afraid we're going to keep seeing these issues increase."

In the meantime, Hovell is trying to make some changes at the local level to help county residents better their health behaviors while increasing the county's overall mortality rate. This year, the county formed an infant death review team to investigate the reasons behind the spike in infant deaths. The department is also trying to get county seniors more active. Hovell said the county will continue to look for ways to educate the community about their health behaviors.

Hovell said access to health care is one of the most important ways a person can better his or her own health behavior, regardless of income.

"There are certainly things people have access to," she said. "Through county health and human services, you can access anything from WIC to BadgerCare."

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Despite poor numbers on more than one health behavior, Jackson County did score significantly high in one area, coming in fifth in the state in reported binge drinking. Only four other counties reported better numbers.

Athens said 15.7 percent of the 250 people surveyed in Jackson County reported binge drinking at least once in the month prior to the survey being conducted. Binge drinking is defined as drinking four or five alcoholic beverages per day at least once a month. Overall, 23.2 percent of people surveyed throughout the state reported binge drinking.

Athens said it is important to keep in mind the variations and margins for error when doing a random survey like this. In the case of reported binge drinking, Jackson County had a 5 percent margin for error, meaning the percent of reported binge drinking could jump to 20 percent or could fall to 10. Athens said the method used for the study is typically used at a state level and it becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint variations at the county level.

"By ranking fifth in the state, that doesn't necessarily mean that you are doing well," Athens said. "The number of people that report binge drinking is still too high."

While Jackson County will continue to explore ways to better its overall health outcome score and the health of its residents, it often comes down to the individual.

"Keep active as best as you can, keep moving, watch what you eat, avoid tobacco products, don't drink and drive," Hovell said. "It is the same basic things you hear year after year."

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