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Winnebago County passes check-up, ranks in top half for overall health

By Jennifer K. Woldt
of *The Northwestern*

Winnebago County residents may not always eat their daily requirement in fruits and vegetables, but they still rank among the top half of the state's counties when it comes to overall health.

A recent study by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute showed 83 percent of Winnebago County residents reported eating less than five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, earning the county a ranking of 65 out of the state's 72 counties.

Still, the study ranked the county among the top half of the state's counties in terms of overall health.

"Given the population of Winnebago County, I think we're doing pretty well," said Winnebago County Public Health Director Doug Gieryn. "We've still got our work cut out for us, but in comparison to other counties, we're OK."

Winnebago County ranked 25th out of the state's 72 counties for health outcomes and 21st in health determinants, according to the 2008 Wisconsin County Health Rankings, a study developed by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute that is a "health check-up" of the state's 72 counties and the city of Milwaukee.

Health outcomes are measured by the rate of premature death and the percent of people who reported being in fair or poor health, while health determinants was determined by analyzing several factors including health care, health behaviors, socioeconomic factors and the physical environment, UW Population Health Institute Director Patrick Remington said.

"Health in a community is determined by many factors," Remington said. "Often times people think about death rates or disease rates as the major determinate factors. But research has shown it is not only the diseases people get but also the factors that increase those diseases that determines health."

Gieryn said he was surprised to see Winnebago County come in below the state average for both smoking and binge drinking. According to the study, 17.4 percent of individuals in the county smoked cigarettes, compared to 20.9 percent for the state, while 22.7 percent reported engaging in binge drinking, compared to 23.2 percent in the state.

Winnebago County ranked 11th in health care, which could be attributed to the three strong health care systems in the county, said David Zerbe, administrator of the Aurora Medical Group in Oshkosh.

The information in the report is a good way for health officials to determine where Winnebago County stands in relation to other counties in the state. Although the countywide data is difficult to use because it is not broken down into information for each city, Oshkosh Health Director Paul Spiegel said the rankings are still useful when planning how to address health issues if used in conjunction with other data.

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