



November 25, 2008

Editorial: Take steps to live healthier lifestyle

Sheboygan County ranks pretty much in the middle when it comes to being considered healthy, according to a report last week from the University of Wisconsin.

So, depending on how you look at it, our glass is either half full or half empty.

The 2008 Wisconsin County Health rankings put Sheboygan County 36th out of the 72 counties in the category called "Health Outcomes," which measures how long we'll live and our general health status.

We fared a little better in the rankings when it came to "Health Determinants," which measures factors that contribute to better health, such as hospital care and the number of people without health insurance. We were 24th in this category.

While neither of these positions compared to the rest of the state is disturbing in themselves, there is still cause to be concerned about some of the findings in the study.

No. 1: The percentage of people in Sheboygan County who engage in "binge drinking" is rising. This past year, 28 percent said they drank to excess at least once in a short period of time. That's up from 25.6 percent in 2007 and 23 percent in 2006.

No. 2: The percentage of people in the county who still smoke is above the state average — 22.4 percent here compared to 20.9 percent statewide.

No. 3: Our air quality here is well below that of the rest of the state. In fact we are 69th out of the 72 counties in this category.

No. 4: We are 71st out of the 72 counties in the percentage of children who test positive for lead poisoning.

Still, there are several things working in our favor to turn these unhealthy outcomes around.

We rank among the top counties in access to health-care insurance and we have made great strides in getting thinner. Over the last three years, the percentage of people in Sheboygan County listed as obese has fallen from 22.8 percent to 21.1 percent, and we're among the top 20 counties in physical activity.

So, while we have the means to better health, we are not doing all of the right things when it comes to becoming healthier.

But if we are going to really turn the corner on living a healthier lifestyle, the onus is on all of us to make the necessary changes, such as quitting smoking or limiting the use of alcohol. Not only would these changes make us feel better, they would also save money on health-care costs in the long run.

The best way to change these unhealthy lifestyles is to take part in wellness programs that are becoming more prevalent in employer-sponsored health insurance. Many of these programs also pay the full cost of an annual physical that can stave off serious illnesses.

While the health status of people living here is generally good, with just a little more effort, we can see significant improvement.
