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Report shows room for improvement in environmental health

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Local health officials said a report citing the region's lower quality of environmental health highlights areas for improvement, but fails to note efforts under way.

The 2008 County Health Rankings, released Thursday by the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute in Madison, suggest environmental health in Lincoln, Marathon, Portage and Wood counties ranks in the bottom quarter of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

Though health behaviors, socioeconomic factors and physical environment were not included in rankings, researchers included them to show how counties compared, said Dr. Patrick Remington, the study's lead author and director of the institute.

"The health of a community is determined by many factors," Remington said. While socioeconomic status and health behaviors play a larger role, people's health is affected by the physical environment and availability of health care.

The report looked at air quality data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state's Department of Natural Resources, nitrate levels in water, percentage of housing built before 1950 (which is more likely to contain lead from paint) and radon risk, measured in the percentage of homes screened and found to have elevated radon levels.

Check the Wausau Daily Herald's online and print editions Saturday for the complete story.
