



Report cites foul water, injury, sloth as concerns Chatham health report says work needed on cancer, heart disease

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PITTSBORO -- Physical inactivity, unintended injury and contaminated water are some of the biggest health concerns for Chatham County, according to the first annual report of the county's health.

The report, compiled for the public for the first time, lists the positive and negative aspects of the health of county residents. While officials point out that Chatham is a relatively healthy county, work still needs to be done, particularly concerning the three leading causes of death in Chatham -- heart disease, cancer and stroke.

"Our priorities to address those would be promotion of good nutrition, physical activity and prevention of smoking," said Dorothy Cilenti, county health director. "We're also very concerned about the health disparities among whites and people of color."

One of those disparities, as stated in the health report, was in infant mortality rates. The rate for whites was 6.6 deaths per 1,000 live births, but 10.6 for other races combined. The Health Department aims to close that gap, Cilenti said.

Board of Health Chairman Don Roscoe also emphasized ethnic discrepancies, especially in reaching the Hispanic community. "That's probably our biggest problem -- the lack of healthcare to them, the language barrier, the lack of good housing, we don't have enough schools, that type of thing," he said.

But the report also noted areas in which the county is thriving, including cultural diversity. Studies also showed positive trends in immunizations, low rates of sexually transmitted infections and reduced use of alcohol and drugs among teenagers.

"Our immunization compliance is one of the best in the state," Cilenti said. "And we've also done a good job making sure children have access to a medical home [doctor]."

Health officials compiled the report using surveys, focus groups, interviews, morbidity/mortality rates and other studies of county demographic groups. "Depending on where there were gaps in our data, we tried to fill that in with other resources," Cilenti said.

The state has health statistics for all the counties; they do comparisons and send the information back to individual counties, said Rachel Stevens, a member of the Chatham County Board of Health. Other methods, like the interviews, are then used to find out how local people feel.

Stevens said the data and the public responses usually match up, but sometimes people have concerns that aren't statistically supported. "[The information] gives an indication of where the Board of Health and the county commissioners should put their resources to work on significant problems in Chatham," she said.

For example, one of the major concerns across the state, and particularly in Chatham, is obesity, Stevens said. To combat that problem, health officials are educating the public about diets, working with the school system to improve student lunches, encouraging the schools to have exercise programs and providing places in the county where people can exercise.

One specific way the county promotes exercise is the Active Chatham Coalition's "Chatham on the Move" program. For \$16, residents can purchase a pedometer from the health department and track the steps they take daily.

Cilenti said the department recommends 10,000 steps a day, or about five miles. There are incentives and rewards if people track their steps and turn in activity logs.

"It promotes activity in daily life because a lot of people say they don't have time to exercise," she said. "You can see how often you actually walk." She added that the process encourages users to incorporate more steps into their lifestyles.

Another health priority the report identified, unintentional injury, often means motor vehicle accidents, officials said. Citizens either don't use or improperly use child safety seats and seat belts, and don't practice safety when using all-terrain vehicles, also known as four-wheelers.

"We work in collaboration with the Sheriff's Department and the local fire department to set up checkpoints in parking lots of grocery stores, and we have technicians who look at how you secure your child safety seat, to ensure you're doing it properly," Cilenti said.

The county also is implementing a driver improvement program for inexperienced drivers. And health officials are working with park rangers to brainstorm water safety ideas and prevent drowning, Cilenti said.

The Board of Health seeks to avoid water contamination by monitoring county wells. Roscoe said well diggers must register with the board, which ensures diggers are certified.

And Cilenti said the Health Department encourages citizens to have their well water sampled. She said the department offers water tests for private wells. Experts check for contaminants such as bacteria, pesticides and petroleum. Citizens can call the environmental health division at 542-8202 to request a sampling.

Health workers said they hope residents will respond to the report by getting involved with the health initiatives and also take more personal responsibility for their own well-being.

Citizens can take part in county health programs through involvement in the community-based group Healthy Chatham, which can be reached at 545-8344.

Stevens said she would like Chatham dwellers to "be self-aware and be involved where they can be."

"The average person can look at [the report] and just be proud that they're in Chatham County," Roscoe said. "And they might want to look and see if they're in any of those groups that are having problems, and then see if there's something they can do to correct it."

On the Net

www.chathampublichealth.org