



Today, the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, released *the County Health Rankings* report for all 50 states—including a ranking for the 95 counties in Tennessee. While the Tennessee Institute of Public Health has issued a similar report for each of the last four years, this is the first time that every county in the nation has received such a report.

When you look at *the Rankings* to see where your home county ranks, you will notice a few obvious things. For example, according to this report, Williamson, Sumner and Rutherford are the three counties in Tennessee with the best health outcomes, while Hardeman, Fentress, and Grundy are the three counties with the lowest health outcomes.

There are, however, three much more important, if less obvious, messages in this report.

The first important message is that every county—highly ranked or lowly ranked—has strengths and weaknesses and, most importantly, opportunities for improvement. This report will provide every county in the state the information that it needs to identify its greatest health challenges. Then it is up to each county—to you and your neighbors—to decide which of these challenges you want to address.

The second important message is to notice that “access to health care” and “quality of health care” account for only a small part of the overall “health” ranking. We now know that access to quality health care, while extremely important, is only one of many factors that impact our health. Education, employment, income, family and social support, community safety, and environmental factors account for a much greater part of the “health” ranking than does access to quality health care. In other words, where your county is ranked is not just the responsibility of the local hospital, or your local health care provider, or your county health department, or, for that matter, your region’s elected leaders, educational system, or business community – it is a responsibility that we all share. We all have a responsibility, and we will only improve our health when we all work together.

About the Tennessee Institute of Public Health: The Tennessee Institute of Public Health was formed by the State of Tennessee as a neutral convener to facilitate new relationships and strengthen existing ones to promote effective collaboration among stakeholders interested in the health of Tennesseans. The institute’s Web site is <http://www.state.tn.us/tniph> Media questions for the Institute should be addressed to Brad Lifford: 423-439-4325. Questions about the institute in general can be addressed to Randy Wykoff, Dean, College of Public Health at East Tennessee State University and Interim Executive Director, Tennessee Institute of Public Health at: 423-439-4243.

The final and most important message from these rankings is the realization that the health challenges that (delete?) we face can be changed. If we work together we can improve our health status, and it isn't as difficult as you might think.

If you want to make your county healthier, these three areas of focus are important:

First, start in your home. Make a commitment to eating a healthier diet and to getting more exercise. Play with your kids and read to them. Spend less time watching television and the computer screen. Cut down on the amount of snacks that you eat and soft drinks you drink. If you use tobacco, what better time to quit—doing so will eliminate the most important preventable cause of death. You don't need to make a total life change. Just take a few small steps at a time.

Second, meet with people in your neighborhood, your place of worship, your social organization, your regional health council or where you work to discuss your local health issues. Bring together as many different people as you can—elected officials, educators, business leaders, healthcare professionals—and begin a discussion about your community's health challenges and what you want to do about them. You don't have to change the entire State—just one neighborhood at a time.

Thirdly, support state-wide projects that can improve health. We know that reducing indoor smoking really can improve health and needs continued attention. Tennessee's Coordinated School Health program is a national model of how state policies can improve health opportunities. Get Fit Tennessee is an initiative designed to help Tennesseans move more and eat a healthier diet. Investments in Public Health provide needed services to many people. People with greater formal education live healthier and longer, so keeping children in school will pay off for years to come. Improving economic opportunities and reducing poverty really will improve health.

Most importantly, be patient. Real progress is being made, but it also can be slow-going. Just four years ago, Tennessee ranked 48th in the nation—the third least healthy state in the nation—according to the United Health Foundation. This year, Tennessee ranked 44th overall. There is a long way to go, but progress is being made.

We encourage, and challenge, everyone in the state to use the recent report as an opportunity to make a shared commitment to improving Tennessee's health—one child, one family, one community at a time.

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