WMJ: Wisconsin’s smoking burden varies widely across the state

MADISON—Despite a significant decline in smoking rates among U.S. adults, smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. A study published in the current issue of WMJ, which ranked the relative burden of smoking in Wisconsin’s 72 counties, found that rates varied widely throughout the state.

“Ultimately, this model of calculating relative smoking burden among counties can be used as a single measure to help identify counties with successful tobacco control and prevention programs and policies, as well as identifying counties in need of investments for improvement,” the authors wrote.

The authors analyzed data in three areas: smoking-attributable diseases for adults 35 and older from 2001 to 2010, adult smoking prevalence rates for Wisconsin residents 18 and older and mothers who smoke during pregnancy from 2001 to 2010. They then combined the three factors to create a single summary measure of the smoking burden for each county.

“Statewide, smoking burden was generally highest in counties in the northern, central and southeastern regions of the state, with lower rates generally seen in the western, north-central, northeastern and Milwaukee suburban counties,” they wrote. “While high rates of smoking-attributable mortality were seen distributed throughout the state, including metropolitan areas, it appeared that adult prevalence and smoking during pregnancy were more confined in the northern counties.”

The authors found that Menominee County had the highest rates for smoking-attributable mortality (387 per 100,000 deaths), adult smoking prevalence (46 percent) and smoking among pregnant women (40.6 percent). They noted that while smoking is not uncommon in Native American communities throughout the country, Menominee County also fits other demographic criteria: a rural county with a high rate of poverty and a low education rate. A third variable,

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veterans, also factored heavily into a county’s smoking burden.

Sawyer County had the next highest prevalence of adult smoking with 27 percent. Lafayette County was the lowest at 8 percent. Ashland County had the second-highest rate of smoking-attributable deaths behind Menominee County with 285 per 100,000 deaths; Calumet County ranked the lowest with 176. Burnett County ranked 71st for women smoking during pregnancy with 33.5 percent; Ozaukee County had the lowest percentage of smoking during pregnancy at 6.9 percent.

“Given the health effects from smoking, it is not surprising that counties with the highest burden from smoking are also those counties that rank as some of the least healthy in the County Health Rankings,” the authors wrote.

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