



For Immediate Release
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Survey Finds Hamilton County Teens Are Making Healthier Choices

The number of Hamilton County teens who have ever tried cigarettes has decreased from 72 percent in 1998 to 43 percent in 2011, according to data from the Hamilton County Regional Health Council's 2011 Youth Risk Behavioral Survey (YRBS). The survey indicates improvement in almost every risk behavior category, when compared to results from the first YRBS survey conducted in 1998.

"We are very excited to see so many positive trends in the behaviors of youth in Hamilton County," said Rae Young Bond, executive director, Chattanooga-Hamilton County Medical Society and Medical Foundation of Chattanooga. "These responses show that young people are making better choices that will lead to healthier emotional and physical outcomes. I was also pleased with the level of school participation for this year's survey," she added.

A total of 3,492 high school students representing 19 public and 6 private schools in Hamilton County took the voluntary survey. The response rate was 69.6 percent. This year marked the third YRBS; previous surveys were conducted in 1998 and 2001, and response rates were 2,990 and 2,752, respectively.

Survey data shows seat belt use has increased and alcohol use has decreased.

- Percentage of teens who have ever tried alcohol (more than a few sips) decreased from 31 percent in 1998 to 21 percent in 2011.
- Percentage who rode with a driver who had been drinking: decreased from 31 percent in 1998 to 21 percent in 2011

The percentage of students who engaged in two or more risky behaviors - smoking, drinking, marijuana use, and sexual intercourse - decreased from 41 percent in 1998 to 28 percent in 2011. The percentage of students not engaging in any of the behaviors increased from 38 percent in 1998 to 50 percent in 2011.

"Young people are realizing that their actions have consequences and we hope to continue these healthy gains. Now we want to use this data to help guide the community so we can focus on areas that need improvement," said Dr. Susan Pollock, information development committee chair.

Students were classified into four risk categories based on their current participation in four key risk behaviors: smoking, drinking, marijuana use, and sexual intercourse.

- Extreme risk-takers (all 4 categories) – 5 percent
- Multiple risk-takers (2 or 3 risks) – 23 percent
- Minimal risk-takers (1 risk) – 22 percent
- Non risk-takers (no risks) – 50 percent

The percentage of non risk takers declined with grade level, from 66 percent of ninth graders to 36 percent of twelfth graders.

Other key findings indicate risky behaviors begin early for some young people, often before the age of 13. Students were asked how old they were when they first experimented with alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, sexual intercourse, and oral sex.

- Male students were more likely than female students to report early initiation in all five risk behaviors
- Black students were more likely than white or Latino students to report early initiation of alcohol use, marijuana use, and sexual behaviors.

Additional findings:

- 17 percent of students reported they currently smoke cigarettes
- 36 percent of students reported ever trying marijuana
- 32 percent of students reported having been in a physical fight over the past 12 months
- 22 percent of students reported carrying a gun, knife, or club within the past 30 days
- 11 percent of both male and female students reported having been intentionally harmed by a boyfriend or girlfriend within the past 12 months

About the Youth Risk Behavior Survey

The Regional Health Council will host a series of briefings on different aspects of the Youth Behavior Risk Survey. We believe the community will be encouraged by some of the data to be released. Future briefings will focus on risky sexual behavior; alcohol, tobacco, and substance abuse; health and wellness; and youth violence bullying, and weapon carrying.

The YRBS is a self administered anonymous questionnaire designed by the Centers for Disease Control. The survey tracks youth risk behaviors in six categories: behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence, tobacco use, alcohol and drug use, sexual behaviors, dietary behaviors, and physical activity.

The Regional Health Council serves as the lead community-based organization designated by the Tennessee Department of Health, responsible for community health assessment, regional health planning, and the provision of input regarding funding decisions for health and health related initiatives.