

# University of Minnesota releases first ever comprehensive report of the health of college students

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A report released by the University of Minnesota Boynton Health Service today is the first of its kind in the nation to conduct a comprehensive survey on the health of college students. About 10,000 college students completed the survey. Although the study is focused on students from 14 campuses in Minnesota, the health findings here reflect national health trends for college students, says Dr. Ed Ehlinger, the director and chief health officer of the university's Boynton Health Service.

The report examines everything from mental health and obesity to financial health and sexual health. It also looks at alcohol use, smoking, personal safety, physical activity and how many students do not have health insurance. One key finding is beginning to show how today's technology is impacting students' health and their academics. In fact, 28.7 percent of students surveyed report excessive computer/Internet/TV use and 41.8 percent indicate the activity affected their academic performance.

Ehlinger said members of the public, higher education leaders and policymakers should pay attention to the findings and make the health of college students a priority.

“The health of college students is important not only to the institutions they attend but also to the health of the state of Minnesota. Good health

helps students remain in school, and a college degree or certificate is an excellent predictor of better health and economic status throughout one's lifetime," Ehlinger said.

Education is one of the strongest influences on economic and health status, Ehlinger said. "College students are a large and growing population and are establishing lifestyles and behavior patterns, they are the trendsetters and the role models for younger people and they are the future leaders of our society. That is why we need to make them a priority," Ehlinger said.

"There is a shortage of information about these students particularly in areas that go beyond alcohol, tobacco and other drug use," Ehlinger said. A survey like this one is beginning the shift to a more comprehensive examination of college student health. Along with Boynton, the study was funded Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Minnesota.

About 24,000 students from 14 Minnesota colleges and universities were randomly selected to participate in this study and 9,931 completed and returned the 2007 College Student Health Survey Report which tracks a wide range of student health issues from mental health and financial health to tobacco, nutrition/obesity and alcohol use.

Survey results will help schools determine what programs they need in place in order to improve the health of students. All five University of Minnesota campuses were included in the survey along with the following schools: Alexandria Technical College; Anoka-Ramsey Community College; Lake Superior College; Minnesota State Community and Technical College; North Hennepin Community College; Northwest Technical College; Bemidji State University; Concordia College; Minnesota State University Moorhead. Ehlinger will outline the report's overall findings during the press conference and health summit on Thursday, Nov. 15.

“The reason we’re studying students from 14 schools is because these health issues are community and state issues. We really need to address college student health issues on a statewide basis and not just on an individual school basis,” Ehlinger said. The survey was designed to look at students in a more holistic way, he said.

“College students face multiple risks to their health and their behavior affects all parts of their existence. We need to look at a student as a complex and complete person,” Ehlinger said.

In addition to the comprehensive 14 school report each participating institution will receive its own school-specific report. Some details on the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities report are available at this point -- 2,920 U of M, Twin Cities students completed the survey out of 6,000 who were randomly selected to participate.

## **Report findings**

### **Mental health**

Results show that 27.1 percent of students surveyed have been diagnosed with a mental health illness within their lifetime and 15.7 percent were diagnosed with a mental health illness in the last 12 months. At the U of M, Twin Cities, 25.1 percent report being diagnosed with at least one mental health condition in their lifetime. Throughout the schools surveyed and on the U of M, Twin Cities campus, depression and anxiety are the two most frequently reported mental health diagnoses of students for both their lifetime and the last 12 months. Of all the surveyed students, 18.5 percent reported being diagnosed during their lifetime with depression and 13.3 percent were diagnosed with anxiety.

### **Physical activity/nutrition/obesity**

Nearly two-fifths or 38.5 percent of all students surveyed fall within the overweight or obese/extremely obese categories. At the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, 29.1 percent of those surveyed fall within the overweight or obese/extremely obese categories. A new issue is surfacing when it comes to student physical health, 28.7 percent of students surveyed report excessive computer/Internet use and 41.8 percent indicate the activity affected their academic performance. On the U of M, Twin Cities campus, 32.2 percent of students surveyed reported excessive computer/Internet use and among this group, 41.9 percent indicate this activity impacted their academic performance.

## **Health insurance/uninsured**

One key finding of the report is that 9.4 percent of all undergraduate students surveyed don't have health insurance. For students in the University of Minnesota system, that rate is only 5.6 without health insurance compared with the 13.7 percent uninsured in non-U of M schools. At the U of M, Twin Cities, the uninsured rate for undergraduate students is 6.5 percent. Students in the 18- to-24-year-old range tend to have insurance, but students who are 25 to 29-years-old are less likely to have insurance.

“We have a fairly low uninsured rate here in the University of Minnesota system where students are required to carry insurance. The higher uninsured rate throughout the rest of the schools makes the argument that a requirement for insurance coverage is a good thing for schools and for students,” Ehlinger said.

The students who have insurance are more likely to go in for preventive health services and have fewer sick days.

“College students use health services on campus and in communities and when it comes to mental health services, students seek out assistance on

campus. “That tells us that colleges really do need to invest in on campus support services.”

## **Financial health**

Of students surveyed, 33.4 percent of them report carrying some level of credit card debt over the past month and 57.8 percent report the debt as \$1,000 or more. On the U of M, Twin Cities campus, 29 percent of students report carrying some level of credit card debt and 59.9 percent report the debt as \$1,000 per month or more.

“Students with greater than \$1,000 of credit card debt tend to have higher rates of depression and have lower grade point averages,” Ehlinger said.

## **Alcohol**

Alcohol use continues to be a concern for universities and colleges. Among students surveyed, 70.5 percent report using alcohol in the last 30 days and 37.1 percent report engaging in high-risk drinking within the past two weeks. At the U of M, Twin Cities, 74.3 percent report using alcohol in the last 30 days and 36.5 percent report engaging in high-risk drinking. Illicit drug use among those surveyed is low with 6.8 percent reporting they had used illicit drugs. On the Twin Cities campus, 7.1 percent report using illicit drugs.

## **Sexual violence**

More than one in five or 22.4 percent of female students report experiencing a sexual assault in their lifetime with 6.8 percent reporting having been assaulted in the last 12 months. For male students, only 4.9 percent report being sexually assaulted in their lifetime with 1.9 percent

reporting an assault within the past 12 months. Such assaults have lingering impact on students and their academic performance, Ehlinger said. Students who have been victims of sexual assault report higher rates of depression.

## **Sexual health**

Of students surveyed, 77.6 percent report having been sexually active in their lifetime and 72.1 percent having been sexually active within the past 12 months. On the U of M, Twin Cities campus, 77.1 percent report having been sexually active in their lifetime and 71.7 percent report having been sexually active within the past 12 months. Nearly four out of five or 78.5 percent of students report having had zero or one sexual partner within the last 12 months. On the U of M, Twin Cities campus, 77.8 students reported having zero or one partner within the last 12 months. “Students are pretty monogamous according to the results, which contradicts the commonly held stereotype of students being promiscuous,” Ehlinger said.

## **Tobacco use**

The current tobacco use rate in the last 30 days for all students at the 14 schools is 25 percent. On the U of M, Twin Cities campus, the current tobacco use rate is 20.9 percent for students ages 18 to 24 and their daily use rate is 3.7 percent, which are the lowest reported use rates among U of M, Twin Cities students since the tobacco data was first collected in 1992. Tobacco use is defined as both smoke and smokeless tobacco.

To view a video interview with Ehlinger, visit: [www1.umn.edu/urelate/newservice/Multimedia\\_Videos/boyn-tonsurvey07.htm](http://www1.umn.edu/urelate/newservice/Multimedia_Videos/boyn-tonsurvey07.htm)

Source: University of Minnesota

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