

# Health in county gets bad report

*Residents here are at greater risk of many ailments than other Floridians, a study says.*

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Published September 29, 2006

St. Petersburg Times

BROOKSVILLE - Hernando County residents are more likely than Floridians generally to die of heart disease, cancer, respiratory ailments and stroke, according to a new study of the county's health needs.

The report, released Thursday to the Health Care Advisory Board, found that county residents were more at risk than the average Floridian between 2000 and 2004 even when age is factored out.

"Across categories, Hernando is at greater risk than Florida," said Jeff Feller, director of community initiatives for the nonprofit WellFlorida Council of Gainesville, which produced the study.

While the rate of heart disease deaths in Hernando was fairly close to the Florida rate - 235.7 per 100,000 versus 232.4 - the difference was substantial for cancer.

In that category, 218.1 per 100,000 Hernando residents died between 2000 and 2004, compared to a statewide death rate of 191.3 per 100,000.

African-Americans from Hernando County are also significantly more likely than whites to die from those diseases, said the study.

And their rate of death from diabetes - 81.8 per 100,000 - was more than three times the white rate of 25.8 per 100,000.

The rate of increase for diabetes was one of the report's big surprises, Feller said. In 2001, 10 percent of those surveyed in telephone polls identified themselves as having diabetes. This year, 15.3 percent of those sampled have the disease, he said.

And 6.4 percent of those surveyed described symptoms of psychological distress within the last 30 days, compared to a national average of about 3 percent, Feller said.

Mental health hospitalization rates were substantially higher in Hernando County than the rest

of Florida. In 2001, there were 9.9 such hospitalizations per 100,000 in the county, while the state recorded 6.5.

Domestic violence rates have dropped during that period, but have been substantially higher every year in Hernando than in the state. In 2004, there were 839 incidents per 100,000 in the county versus 680 in Florida.

Some of the county's poor health numbers could be explained by rapid population growth that has, in some cases, outpaced the growth of health services.

Between 1980 and 2000, Hernando County's population grew by 194.1 percent, while Florida's population grew by just 57.4 percent, Feller said.

While 19.2 percent of Floridians lack insurance, only 17.3 percent of Hernando residents - 18,000 people - fell into that category in 2005. But the rate of Medicaid recipients grew at twice the state rate, which Feller said could spell problems for adequate health access in the future.

Twenty-seven percent of those uninsured residents belong to a family in which two or more people work full time, often in low-paying service jobs.

"It's not just people who are not working who are uninsured," Feller said.

The report - which used state and federal health statistics, focus groups, and 743 telephone interviews - recommended community meetings to discuss better use of existing health resources.

It cost about \$20,000 and was paid for by the County Commission and the county Health Department.

It also suggested a community-wide "social marketing plan" to help residents make better health-related and economic decisions

Feller said such a campaign might help raise awareness about existing resources, such as the state's new Web site for comparing health care providers and services, [www.floridacompare-care.gov](http://www.floridacompare-care.gov).

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