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Community Health Assessment Provides Insight Into Overall Health Of Marion County Residents

Cancer has surpassed heart disease as the number one killer of Marion County residents. That's one of the findings from a comprehensive assessment of Marion County's overall health.

The Community Health Assessment, to be released September 26, shows that cancer, heart disease, smoking and sexually transmitted diseases continue to be significant issues causing a majority of local deaths.

The assessment combines data from local, state and national sources to describe the health status of Marion County residents and to examine trends in the health of the county. The report's data sources include birth and death certificates, hospital discharge records, the U.S. Census and local, state and national surveys.

"Awareness of our health issues helps further community education that leads to creative opportunities to prevent, and where necessary, respond to issues that threaten the overall health of our community. Prevention efforts, developed through partnerships utilizing local resources, are critical to predicting, preventing and responding to public health issues," said Dr. Virginia A. Caine, director, Marion County Health Department.

Since 1960, death rates from heart disease have been decreasing throughout the United States. The decrease in Marion County has been especially steep: a 23% decline from 2000 through 2005. During the same period, mortality from cancer has been fairly stable, both nationally and locally. As a result, Marion County's heart disease mortality is now below it's mortality from cancer. Nationally, heart disease mortality remains slightly higher than that of cancer.

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While smoking rates in Marion County and nationally continue to decrease, past smoking habits and the related health consequences are reflected in on-going health issues. Marion County's overall death rate exceeds the national rate by 8 percent. A majority of that rate is attributed to smoking. Lung cancer and chronic obstructed pulmonary disease (COPD) death rates are 28 percent and 41 percent above the national rate respectively. Most of those deaths are directly related to smoking. According to 2003 data, the national prevalence of smoking among pregnant women was 10.7 percent, compared to Marion County's 17.6 percent. Smoking is especially common among Whites, including 33 percent of adult White males and 40 percent of pregnant White females less than 20 years old.

Another area of concern, especially related to African American males living in Marion County, is the high rate of years of potential life lost. This issue revolves around individuals who die earlier than average mortality rates. Contributing to these deaths are accidents, suicides and homicides. Only cancer ranks ahead of accidents, suicides and homicides in terms of the cause of early death for African American males living in Marion County.

The assessment showed Marion County's success in confronting significant communicable disease outbreaks, including the 1999 syphilis outbreak. That year, Marion County had the highest incidence of syphilis of any large U.S. city. The Stamp Out Syphilis Coalition (SOS), a broad based community response effort coordinated by the Marion County Health Department, reduced the incidence of syphilis, taking the Indianapolis incidence rate to the lowest of any large U.S. city in 2003, 2004 and 2005. The SOS model continues to be used to respond to other health issues.

Another encouraging finding in the assessment was Marion County's low breast cancer mortality rate, third lowest among the 54 largest U.S. cities.

Marion County continues to experience high rates of Chlamydia and Gonorrhea. As of 2005, in the 15-24 age range, there was 1 case of Gonorrhea for every 47 individuals. The incidence of Chlamydia was similar for males age 15-24, while there was one female case of Chlamydia for every 16 females. Those statistics give Marion County one of the nations highest incidence rates.

Along with these issues, Marion County faces imminent health problems due to obesity, inactivity, poor diet and poor access to health care.

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Reporters: Dr. Virginia A. Caine, director, Marion County Health Department, will be available for interviews following the formal presentation.

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