

Little or No Progress in Changing Unhealthy Lifestyles

No improvement in latest measures for smoking and obesity, but seatbelt use continues to increase

ROCHESTER, N.Y. – March 4, 2009 – Most health care experts blame American lifestyles, and particularly the large number of Americans who are obese, as one reason why life expectancy in the United States is lower than in many other countries. They also agree that the best thing we could do to improve our health would be to reduce tobacco use, exercise more and eat less and more healthy food. Unfortunately we have not been able to do this. Every year, *The Harris Poll*® measures the number of people who smoke, who are overweight and obese and who wear seatbelts. The latest Harris Poll finds little reason for optimism that Americans can learn to live more healthy lifestyles.

This year's survey conducted by Harris Interactive, is based on telephone interviews with 1,010 adults surveyed between February 10 and 15, 2009.

Smoking

Twenty percent of adults smoke cigarettes. This number fluctuates by small amounts each year, presumably because of sampling error. However, the decline of cigarette smoking has been extraordinarily slow, from 29% in the early 1980's, to 25% in the early 1990's, 23% between 2001 and 2005 and, on average, 21% between 2006 and 2009.

There are several reasons why so many people still smoke. Large numbers of young people still start to smoke because it makes them feel cool, grown-up, sophisticated or chic. And once people are hooked, tobacco is powerfully addictive. Many surveys have shown that most smokers have tried, and failed, to stop smoking several times.

This Harris Poll also finds that in addition to the 20% of adults who smoke, a further 3% smoke cigars, smoke pipes, or chew tobacco.

Obesity

This latest survey finds that 80% of the adults over 25 are *overweight* by one definition (the Metropolitan Life tables) and 66% of all adults by another (Body Mass Index). It also finds that 32% of people over 25 are *obese* using the first definition (20% or more above the recommended weight in the Metropolitan Life tables) or 26% of adults using the Body Mass Index. These numbers are neither the highest nor the lowest recorded in recent years, however, the trend has been a remorseless increase in obesity over the last 25 years. In the early 80s, 15% of adults over 25 were obese (based on the Metropolitan Life tables). The average number for the last four surveys, from 2006 to 2009, is 35%. Obesity has more than doubled over 25 years.

Seat Belt Use

The one bright spot in this series of measures is that the proportion of adults who report that they always wear a seat belt when in the front seat of a car has increased and keeps on increasing. This year fully 91% of all adults claim to do so, the highest number we have ever recorded and four points higher than last year.

Over the 26 years we have been measuring this, those who use seatbelts have increased from only 19% to 91%. Or, if you use the average data to smooth out sampling fluctuations, this has increased from 29% in the early 1980's to 88% since 2006.

So What?

These data reflect how difficult it is to help people to stop smoking, to eat less or to exercise more. Most people know what they should do but cannot do it. Some experts believe a major reason for this is the large number of advertisements people see for foods, sugar-rich drinks.

**TABLE 1
HEALTH RISKS IN 5 YEAR INCREMENTS SINCE 1983**

	Smoke Cigarettes ⁽¹⁾	Overweight ⁽²⁾	Obese (20% Overweight) ⁽³⁾	Always Wear Seatbelts ⁽⁴⁾
Averages For:	%	%	%	%
1983-1985 (3 years only)	29	59	15	29
1986-1990	27	61	17	60
1991-1995	25	67	19	71
1996-2000	24	75	28	76
2001-2005	23	78	32	83
2006-2009 (4 years only)	21	80	35	88

Notes: ⁽¹⁾ Adults aged 18+ who smoke cigarettes (does not include use of pipe, cigars or chewing tobacco)

⁽²⁾ Adults aged 25+ who weigh more than their recommended weight based on height and body frame, using the Metropolitan Life tables.

⁽³⁾ Adults aged 25+ who weigh 20 percent or more than their recommended weight based on height and body frame, using the Metropolitan Life tables.

⁽⁴⁾ Claim to always wear seat belts in front seat of car.

Sample sizes vary from 4,039 adults for 2006-2009 to approximately 5,000 adults in the previous five year periods.

TABLE 2
SMOKING, OVERWEIGHT AND SEAT BELT USE – ANNUAL TRENDS 1983 – 2009

Base: All adults

	Smoke Cigarettes	Are Overweight*	20% or More Overweight*	Always Wear Seatbelts**
	%	%	%	%
1983	30	58	15	19
1984	28	56	N/A	27
1985	30	62	15	41
1986	27	59	N/A	55
1987	28	59	15	57
1988	26	64	18	60
1989	28	61	17	63
1990	26	64	16	65
1991	25	63	15	69
1992	24	66	N/A	70
1994	26	69	N/A	71
1995	25	71	22	73
1996	24	74	24	75
1997	26	72	27	74
1998	26	76	28	77
1999	24	74	27	77
2000	21	79	32	79
2001	25	76	32	81
2002	23	80	33	81
2003	24	80	33	85
2004	25	76	30	83
2005	19	77	30	86
2006	22	83	39	86
2007	24	79	36	87
2008	17	78	33	87
2009	20	80	32	91

*Adults aged 25 and over (for weight only).

**When in front seat of car

N/A=Not available.

Note 1: In almost all years the survey was conducted in January or February.

Note 2: "Overweight" is based on the Metropolitan Life Tables using self-reported weight, height and body frame (small, medium or large). Like all self-reporting this is subject to error, but the identical questions and methods were used in all these surveys.

Note 3: Poll not conducted in 1993.

TABLE 3
BODY MASS INDEX (BMI)

Base: All adults

	Overweight	Obese
	%	%
2005	59	23
2006	66	27
2007	63	23
2008	58	23
2009	66	26

Note: The data for 2005-2007 was only for adults aged 25+.

The data for 2008 and 2009 is for adults aged 18+, so the difference between 2008 and 2007 are **not** a trend.

TABLE 4
USE OF OTHER TOBACCO PRODUCTS

“Do you smoke a pipe or cigars or use chewing tobacco?”

Base: All adults

	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%
Pipe	2	1	1	*
Cigars	4	3	5	3
Chewing tobacco	2	2	3	2
Smoke Cigarettes	22	24	17	20
Use any type of tobacco product (including cigarettes)	26	28	23	23

Methodology

The Harris Poll® was conducted by telephone within the United States between February 10 and 15, 2009 among a nationwide cross section of 1,010 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region, number of adults in the household, size of place (urbanicity), and number of phone lines voice/telephone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100 percent response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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