List of top 5 health issues for central AL residents

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MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - Blue Cross Blue Shield released its first health index on Tuesday. The database allows anyone who visits the site the ability to see the percentage of people who are living with “optimal” health by county.

There is also a list of the top five most common health issues in each county. Every state is represented by county, except for Alaska and Hawaii.

Blue Cross Blue Shield said the data was gathered from medical insurance claims from 40 million of its members from its 36 independent companies. The insurance giant said this allowed for them to know what consumers are “actually” going to the doctor and requesting medical help for.

The company gathered data, considering 200 common diseases and conditions to determine which of those were most prominent in each county.

Eric Lail, a spokesperson for BCBS, said that finding out what health issues are plaguing specific counties often leads to an accurate depiction of what is impacting the state as a whole.

Each county received a decimal figure to be configured into a percentage that indicates the portion of the population living in healthy conditions. The range for all of the nation's counties is 86.7 percent to 96.8 percent, with the national average at 92.4 percent.

Montgomery (91.3%), Macon (89.6%), Bullock (90.7%), Pike (91.4%), Butler (91.4%), Crenshaw (91.0%), Lowndes (91.8%), Autauga (91.5%), Elmore (90.9%) and Lee (92.8%) counties all have the same five most common health conditions: hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol, depression/anxiety/mood disorders and coronary artery disease.

According to Dr. Zaid Mahmood, a pediatrician, and Dr. George Thomas, the chief medical officer, of Health Services Inc., all of the conditions prominently plaguing the region are caused by poor lifestyle choices like unhealthy diet, lack of exercise, smoking and excessive stress.

"People attribute issues like high blood pressure to one single thing," Thomas said. "People will come in and say their blood pressure is high because of a piece of pork they had last night when it's actually something that has to be monitored over time. It's the same thing with diabetes."

They said it started with choices and behavior in the early phases of life.

"Obesity is something I've noticed more here (Montgomery) than where I came from," Dr. Mahmood said. "It's obesity and hypertension in children between the ages of 13 and 18. They don't eat healthy food or exercise. They eat junk food and the family around them doesn't give them to support to eat healthy food that's prepared at home and keep them from eating high caloric food."

Both physicians also said that conditions are all intertwined. For instance, high cholesterol creates blockage in the arteries, which leads to coronary artery disease (heart disease) that can eventually lead to a heart attack.

Poor diet choices can aggravate blood pressure levels and lead to diabetes. People who struggle with their weight are susceptible to mental health ramifications as a result.

Dr. McVay, the Director of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease for the Alabama Department of Public Health, said the information does not come as a surprise to him at all. He said the situation is getting worse.

"We know what people are dying from," McVay said. "We know they need to modify their behavior, and unfortunately they are making poor lifestyle choices. There are places in the country that are seeing improvements in these indicators, Alabama is not one of them."

McVay said, historically, each generation is supposed to be healthier than the generation before it. However, the youth of today will be the first generation to grow up using electronic gadgets for leisure, in the place of physical activity.

"There is a possibility, for the first time in our history, that we're going to have a new generation of young people who are not going to be as healthy as the adults," McVay said.

Nationally, the top five most prominent issues are nearly the same as the ones found in the central Alabama counties. The difference is that instead of coronary artery disease being amongst the top five nationally, substance abuse fills its place.

While the counties previously mentioned are mostly consistent with other Alabama's, there are some outliers. For example, the second most common health condition in Etowah County (90.6%) is substance abuse. In Conecuh County (90.5%), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is the fourth most common condition.

This is BCBS's first publication of a health index, but the company said the value of the database will really be seen in the coming years as the database is continually updated. This will allow for residents and health experts to see patterns, changes and what does/does not improve.
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