Health Behavior Change and Sociodemographic Variables
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ABSTRACT
Study findings have illustrated the differences in health habits for people of different ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between sociodemographic variables and stages of behavioral change. Medical students surveyed 1078 patients in 7 clinics around Texas about health behaviors and behavior change related to eating, drinking, smoking, and exercise. Demographic information was also collected: age, ethnicity, income, gender, educational background, and marital status. In smokers, people over 65 were less interested in changing their behavior. In drinkers, women, Anglos, and those within an income over $4000/month were less interested in change than other groups. Regarding eating behavior, high percentages of women were currently changing their eating habits but for older people and Anglos many remained unwilling to change. For exercise behavior, people over 65 and those without a HS education had no interest in changing their exercise behaviors. The majority of people under the age of 65 planned to change their exercise behavior within the next 6 months or 30 days. Overall strong correlations were found between certain demographic variables and the willingness of the participants to alter their current health habit.

BACKGROUND
Health disparities continue to exist and are more prominent across certain demographic boundaries. Study findings have illustrated the differences in health habits for people of different ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds. For the four health behaviors eating, exercising, smoking, and alcohol consumption, certain demographic variables are related to an individual’s willingness to change certain health behaviors. For example, higher level of education is a strong predictor for smoking cessation but also a strong predictor for increased alcohol consumption. For the most part more education and higher income tends to predict better health. But what predicts a person’s willingness to change unhealthy habits? The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics and stages of behavioral change.

MATERIALS and METHODS
This cross-sectional survey of patients’ health behaviors was conducted in seven family medicine residency program clinics across the state of Texas. At each site, medical students surveyed 150 consecutive adult patients who presented for routine outpatient care, for a total of 1078 respondents. Surveys addressed four health behaviors (tobacco and alcohol use, physical activity, and diet), stage of behavioral change, health status, including BMI and chronic conditions, and sociodemographic characteristics (age, ethnicity, income, gender, educational background, marital status). In this analysis, stage of behavioral change was defined in this way: “Precontemplation stage” was a disinterest in change; “Contemplation” was planning a change in the future, and “Action” was trying to change now.

RESULTS
Smoking Behavior
Of 216 smokers, 34% were trying to quit now. Only age was associated with stage of change, (p=0.038). More than forty percent of patients over 65 remained in the precontemplation stage compared to 11% of those under 65.

Alcohol Consumption
The heaviest consumers of alcohol were men (p=0.041), Anglos (p=0.01), unmarried people, (p=0.038), and people with higher income (p=0.01). Of 281 drinkers, 17% were trying to quit now. Women, Anglos, and those within an income over $4000/month (~70%) were more likely to be in the precontemplation stage regarding their alcohol habits. Regarding marital status, divorced individuals were least likely to be in the action stage; most remained in the precontemplation stage.

Eating Behavior
Of 1078 respondents, 18% considered themselves to be healthy eaters. Among the remainder, 51% were trying to eat healthier now. Exercise behavioral change correlated significantly with age (p=0.00) and education levels (p=0.045). The majority of individuals over 65 (>50%) were in the pre-contemplation stage regarding their exercise habits, but more people in this age group reported being happy with their weight. The majority of people less than 65 planned to change their exercise habits within the next six months or 30 days. Regarding the education level, those with lower than a HS education were less likely to change their exercise habits compared to those with higher than a college education.

CONCLUSIONS
• For eating, exercising, and smoking behaviors, the majority of people in the >65 age group remained uninterested in change.
• Individuals with less than a high school education were less likely to be in the precontemplation stage regarding their exercise habits.
• With ethnicity as a predictor, twice as many Anglos as Hispanic and African American were in the precontemplation stage for the drinking behavior.
• A high percentage of women were currently trying to change their eating habits.

REFERENCES

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