



# Familial influences on Health Behaviors

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## ABSTRACT

The effects of family on health behaviors have long been of interest to researchers. This project was constructed to determine the influence of marital status, household size, gender, and ethnicity on health behaviors such as smoking, alcohol consumption, diet, and physical activity. A survey was given to patients in seven different family medicine clinics across Texas to determine current health behaviors. The results of this study found unmarried individuals, Caucasians, and men to be more likely to smoke and drink in excess, while African-Americans consumed the most fast food. The results of this study confirm much of the already published data, that family in addition to other factors have some bearing on health behaviors.

## BACKGROUND

“Family” is a concept that consists of many variables. Marital status certainly affects the dynamic of the family, while household size is also a factor. Genders normally take on specific roles, while ethnicity may foster traditions that shape family life. The influence of certain aspects of family on health behaviors has often been a topic of research. A study conducted by the National Cancer Institute in 2005 found a correlation between ethnicity and smoking habits.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, another study found a link between gender and alcohol use.<sup>2</sup> A recent study published in 2006 found that unmarried individuals were most likely to engage in unsafe drinking practices.<sup>3</sup> However, few studies have been conducted to determine the influence of marital status and household size on health behaviors. The intention of this study was to focus on specific family characteristics, namely marital status, and household size and determine their effects on smoking, alcohol, diet, and physical activity. In addition, the effects of gender and ethnicity on these behaviors was studied as well.

## 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 demographic characteristics.

## RESULTS

Of those surveyed, 25.4% were male and 74.6% were female. The majority of the sample was of Hispanic (48.9%), Caucasian (28.2%), or African-American (19.1%) descent, while the other ethnicities and those of mixed descent were combined in a final group (3.8%). Levels of education varied from less than a high school degree to graduate work. The participants reported household incomes from less than one thousand a month to over four thousand a month, though the majority reported income levels in the former group (30.4%). In regards to marital status, 46.2% were married, 12.2% were living with a partner, 18.2% were divorced or separated, 6.0% were widowed, and 17.4% were never married.

Divorced or separated individuals were most likely to be current smokers ( $p=.020$ ) and under-active ( $p=.031$ , Figure 1). Unmarried men and women were more likely to smoke ( $p=.000$ ) and drink ( $p=.000$ , Figure 2). In larger households, individuals were less likely to smoke ( $p=.001$ ), ate fewer fruits and vegetables ( $p=.019$ ), and consumed more fast food ( $p=.019$ ) than smaller households (Figure 3). Men were more apt to be smokers ( $p=.000$ , Figure 4) and drinkers ( $p=.000$ ). Caucasians were most likely to be smokers ( $p=.000$ , Figure 5) and drinkers ( $p=.000$ ), while African-Americans were most likely to consume fast food ( $p=.001$ , Figure 6).

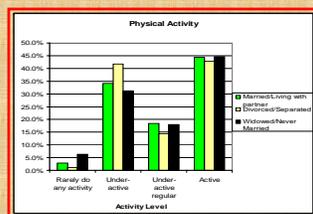


Figure 1

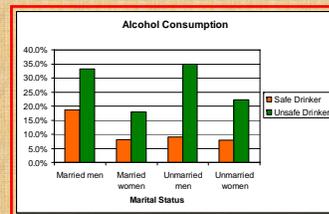


Figure 2

Smoking Status	Household Size	
Non-smoker	3.29	
Previous smoker	2.63	
Current smoker	3.13	
Household Size		
Eating Habits	Fruits and Vegetables (per day)	Fast Food (per week)
0-3	3.40	2.95
4 or 5	3.01	3.04
6 or more	3.01	3.37

Figure 3

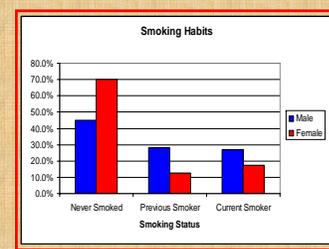


Figure 4

## RESULTS (cont.)

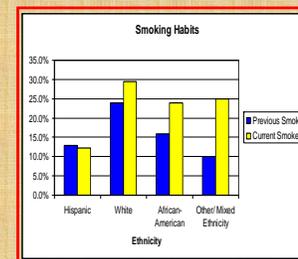


Figure 5

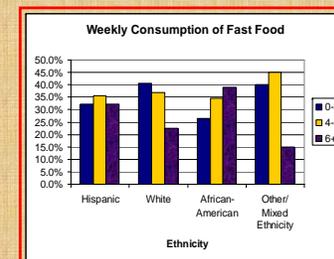


Figure 6

## CONCLUSIONS

- Marital status has an effect on physical activity, smoking, and drinking. Divorced/separated individuals are more likely to be under-active and current smokers. Unmarried men and women are more likely to be current smokers and unsafe drinkers when compared to their married counterparts.
- As household size increases, individuals are less likely to smoke, and they eat fewer vegetables and consume more fast food.
- Men are more likely than women to be smokers, both currently and previously, as well as exhibit safe and unsafe drinking habits.
- Within the various ethnic groups, Caucasians are more likely to be smokers and drinkers, while African-Americans are more likely to consume fast food than the other groups.
- Larger households should be encouraged to change their eating habits to include more fruits and vegetables and less fast food, which could in turn foster healthy habits in their children. In addition unmarried individuals, especially men, should reduce their alcohol and cigarette use. Physicians are encouraged to keep these findings in mind when counseling their patients.

## REFERENCES

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