



Gender Differences In Health Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Many people engage in risky health behaviors that have a great impact on their life, but who is more likely to engage in these behaviors? The purpose of this study is to find out if there are any gender differences in health behaviors such as drinking, smoking, diet, and physical activity. This cross-sectional survey of patients' health behaviors was conducted in seven family medicine residency program clinics across the state of Texas where medical students surveyed 150 consecutive adult. Overall, the data suggest that men engage in riskier behavior, such as drinking and smoking, but are more physically active than women. This data confirms information in previous studies.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic diseases are the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in this nation. Practicing healthy behaviors (e.g., eating a nutritious diet, being physically active, and avoiding tobacco use) has been linked to chronic disease prevention, but not everyone carries on these health habits³. Not only has practicing healthy behaviors been linked to disease prevention, marriage has also been related to better responses to stress, the practice of healthier behaviors, and better health in general⁴. Gender plays a key role in determining whether a person will participate in risky health behavior. Studies conducted by the European Centre on Health of Societies in Transition state that smoking among women remains relatively low whereas men have a higher prevalence of smoking¹. Another study conducted by the Oregon Health & Science University and Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research stated that men were more likely than women to drink alcohol and to drink more heavily but were in better health². The purpose of this study is to determine if there are any gender differences in 4 different health behaviors and examine the interaction between marital status and gender.

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

The sample consisted of 25% male and 75% female of which 49% were Hispanic, 28% were White, 19% were African-American, 1% were Asian, and 3% were of other ethnicity. The average age was 42.6 years with an average high school education. The sample included 12% pregnant women as well.

From the four health behaviors that were observed, only the correlations between gender and drinking, smoking, and physical activity were significant. (p<.001) BMI and diet did not differ by gender. The results are seen in the tables below. Overall, males were more active, drank more, and smoked more than women. Investigators observed that some pregnant women in this sample reported drinking alcohol. When analyzing the interactions between marital status and gender, investigators observed that unmarried men were more active than married men, but women, married or not, reported about the same level of physical activity. Unmarried men and women smoked more and drank more than married men and women.

In addition to questions about health behaviors, each person was asked several questions about changing their health habits. When asked about trying to change their drinking habits, more men than women were trying to quit now. (p=.041) More women were trying to change their eating habits right now than men, but more men planned to change their diet someday. (p=.005) When asked if someone in their family needed to change, 80.5% of the males and 92.1% of the females reported that they would change with their family members if the relative needed to change a health behavior. (p=.012)

Gender Differences In Smoking

	Never Smoked	Previous Smoker	Current Smoker (past 7days)	X ² P value
Male	45.1% 119	28% 74	26.9% 71	
Female	67% 432	13.3% 86	19.7% 127	
Pregnant Female	85.4% 111	8.5% 11	6.2% 8	.00
Married Male	43.8% 74	32.5% 55	23.7% 40	
Unmarried Male	47.4% 45	20.0% 19	32.6% 31	
Married Female	74.6% 326	10.5% 46	14.9% 65	
Unmarried Female	63.9% 212	15.4% 51	20.8% 69	.00

Acknowledgements

This study was conducted in the Residency Research Network of Texas (RRNeT) with support from the Health Services and Resources Administration, the Medical Hispanic Center of Excellence, the office of the Medical Dean, UTHSCSA, and the South Central Texas Area Health Education Center.

Gender Differences In Drinking

	Nondrinker	Safe Drinker	Not Safe Drinker >2drinks/day	X ² P value
Male	51.1% 139	15.1% 41	33.8% 92	
Female	68.6% 457	9.2% 61	22.2% 148	
Pregnant Female	89.5% 119	2.3% 3	8.3% 11	.00
Married Male	48.0% 82	18.7% 32	33.3% 57	
Unmarried Male	56% 56	9.0% 9	35% 35	
Married Female	73.8% 333	8.2% 37	18.0% 81	
Unmarried Female	69.9% 239	7.9% 27	22.2% 76	.00

Gender Differences In Physical Activity

	Rarely Do Any Activity	Under-Active	Under-Active-Regular	Active	X ² P value
Male	2.7% 7	24.7% 63	15.3% 39	57.3% 146	
Female	3.3% 21	36.8% 231	17.8% 112	42.0% 264	
Pregnant Female	4.6% 6	44.3% 58	21.4% 28	29.8% 39	.00
Married Male	2.5% 4	24.8% 40	18.0% 29	54.7% 88	
Unmarried Male	3.2% 3	24.5% 23	10.6% 10	61.7% 58	
Married Female	3.0% 13	37.9% 163	18.8% 81	40.2% 173	
Unmarried Female	4.3% 14	38.4% 124	18.3% 59	39.0% 126	.001

CONCLUSIONS

Overall the data show that men smoke and drink more than women. They tend to engage in more physical activity than women, but many are interested in changing their habits. On the other hand, this study does not fully support prior research that suggests that marriage or partnership increases healthier behavior. While married men and women smoked less and drank less alcohol, unmarried men were the most physically active.

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