

NATIONAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION EXAMINATION SURVEY

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

Public health professionals and policymakers require accurate and current statistical data. This information is used to account for illness and disability among populations in the United States. To be most effective, the data collected should monitor trends in medical conditions, risk behaviors, risk factors, health habits, environmental exposures, and emerging public health issues and technologies.

WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

CDC conducts the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), the only national source of objectively measured health data capable of providing accurate estimates of both diagnosed and undiagnosed medical conditions in the population. NHANES represents a unique collaboration between CDC, the National Institutes of Health, and others to obtain data for biomedical research, public health, tracking health indicators, and policy development. Through physical examinations, clinical and laboratory tests, and interviews, NHANES assesses the health status of adults and children throughout the United States. Mobile examination centers travel across the nation, collecting data on chronic conditions, nutritional status, medical risk factors (e.g., high-cholesterol level, obesity, high blood pressure), dental health, vision, illicit drug use, blood lead levels, food safety, and other factors that are impossible to assess by use of interviews alone. Findings from this survey are essential for determining rates of major diseases and health conditions (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, infectious diseases) and developing public health policies and prevention interventions.

Example of Program in Action

NHANES data provided the first sign that the nation's effort to fortify foods with folic acid to prevent birth defects was succeeding. Data from the 1999–2000 NHANES showed a tripling of the average level of folic acid in the blood compared with previous surveys. Increased folate levels from food fortification have the potential to reduce a woman's risk of giving birth to a baby with a birth defect of the spine or brain (spina bifida or anencephaly).

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

- Ensure that NHANES field operations are fully supported to maintain the overall sample size of NHANES.
- Implement the Community Health and Nutrition and Examination Survey to provide flexible and timely access to quality examination and laboratory data for defined populations that cannot be addressed by use of the standard NHANES framework.