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Results of NHANES benefit people in the United States in important ways. Facts about the distribution of health problems and risk factors in the population give researchers important clues to the causes of disease. Information collected from the current survey is compared with information collected in previous surveys. This allows health planners to detect the extent various health problems and risk factors have changed in the U.S. population over time. By identifying the health care needs of the population, government agencies and private sector organizations can establish policies and plan research, education, and health promotion programs that help improve present health status and will prevent future health problems.

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The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) is a program of studies designed to assess the health and nutritional status of adults and children in the United States. The survey is unique in that it combines interviews and physical examinations. NHANES is a major program of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). NCHS is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and has the responsibility for producing vital and health statistics for the Nation.

The NHANES program began in the early 1960s and has been conducted as a series of surveys focusing on different population groups or health topics. In 1999, the survey became a continuous program that has a changing focus on a variety of health and nutrition measurements to meet emerging needs. The survey examines a nationally representative sample of about 5,000 persons each year. These persons are located in counties across the country, 15 of which are visited each year.

The NHANES interview includes demographic, socioeconomic, dietary, and health-related questions. The examination component consists of medical, dental, and physiological measurements, as well as laboratory tests administered by highly trained medical personnel. Findings from this survey will be used to determine the prevalence of major diseases and risk factors for diseases. Information will be collected on the prevalence of chronic conditions in the population. Estimates for previously undiagnosed conditions, as well as those known to and reported by respondents, are produced through the survey. Such information is a particular strength of the NHANES program.

The survey examines the health status of older Americans. NHANES has a primary role in this endeavor. All participants visit the physician. Dietary interviews and body measurements are included for everyone. All but the very young have a blood sample taken and will have a dental screening. Depending upon the age of the participant, the rest of the examination includes tests and procedures to assess the various aspects of health listed above. In general, the older the individual, the more extensive the examination.

Survey Content

As in past health examination surveys, data will be collected on the prevalence of chronic conditions in the population. Estimates for previously undiagnosed conditions, as well as those known to and reported by respondents, are produced through the survey. Such information is a particular strength of the NHANES program.

Risk factors, those aspects of a person’s lifestyle, constitution, heredity, or environment that may increase the chances of developing a certain disease or condition, will be examined. Smoking, alcohol consumption, sexual practices, drug use, physical fitness and activity, weight, and dietary intake will be studied. Data on certain aspects of reproductive health, such as use of oral contraceptives and breastfeeding practices, will also be collected.

The diseases, medical conditions, and health indicators to be studied include:

- Anemia
- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Environmental exposures
- Infectious diseases
- Kidney disease
- Mental health
- Obesity
- Oral health
- Osteoporosis
- Physical fitness and physical functioning
- Reproductive history and sexual behavior
- Respiratory disease (asthma, chronic bronchitis, emphysema)
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The sample for the survey is selected to represent the U.S. population of all ages. To produce reliable statistics, NHANES oversamples persons 60 and older, African Americans, and Hispanics.

Since the United States has experienced dramatic growth in the number of older people during this century, the aging population has major implications for health care needs, public policy, and research priorities. NCHS is working with public health agencies to increase the knowledge of the health status of older Americans. NHANES has a primary role in this endeavor.

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Survey Operations

Health interviews are conducted in respondents’ homes. Health measurements are performed in specially-designed and equipped mobile centers, which travel to locations throughout the country. The study team consists of a physician, medical and dental technicians, as well as dietary and health interviewers. Many of the study staff are bilingual (English/Spanish).

An advanced computer system using high-end servers, desktop PCs, and wide-area networking collect and process all of the NHANES data, nearly eliminating the need for paper forms and manual coding operations. This system allows interviewers to use notebook computers with electronic pens. The staff at the mobile center can automatically transmit data into data bases through such devices as digital scales and stadiometers. Touch-sensitive computer screens let respondents enter their own responses to certain sensitive questions in complete privacy. Survey information is available to NCHS staff within 24 hours of collection, which enhances the capability of collecting quality data and increases the speed with which results are released to the public.

In each location, local health and government officials are notified of the upcoming survey. Households in the study area receive a letter from the NCHS Director to introduce the survey. Local media may feature stories about the survey.

NHANES is designed to facilitate and encourage participation. Transportation is provided to and from the mobile center if necessary. Participants receive compensation and a report of medical findings is given to each participant. All information collected in the survey is kept strictly confidential. Privacy is protected by public laws.

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