

South Jersey counties included in American Cancer Society study

By **THOMAS BARLAS** Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, March 25, 2013 2:00 am

The American Cancer Society is beginning a national, decades-long cancer study, and organizers say the smoking habits of South Jersey residents make the region a key area for their investigation.

Cancer Prevention Study-3 will monitor as many as 300,000 cancer-free volunteers for as long as 30 years to determine how lifestyles and the environments in which they live help cause or prevent different forms of the disease.

One study area involves lung cancer. A society report released in June showed that men and women living in Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Ocean counties have lung cancer rates that exceed the state average.

The study also showed that South Jersey has the highest percentage of adult smokers in the state. Topping the list is Cumberland County, where the society estimates that about 25 percent of adults smoke tobacco products. The society contends that smoking is a major cause of lung cancer.

The society's June report also says smoking rates have not declined for the state's poor and less educated residents. South Jersey counties such as Cumberland and Salem have some of the weakest economies in the state. Cumberland County's high school graduation rate is less than the state average.

"There is a lot that needs to be investigated," American Cancer Society Executive Vice President Frank Mascia III said of the South Jersey statistics. "We certainly want to focus on the disparity in the (state) population. You can see by the numbers there is a serious problem."

Mascia said the overall physical health of people who live in South Jersey, and how that may contribute to various cancers, is also in question.

That concern is bolstered by an annual County Health Rankings & Roadmap study by the Princeton-based Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin.

Results of the 2013 report, released Wednesday, give low marks to several South Jersey counties in six measurable categories of mortality, morbidity, health behaviors, social and economic factors, physical environment and clinical care. Cumberland County was ranked the least healthy county in New Jersey for the fourth consecutive year.

Melanie Pirolo is director of cancer services for South Jersey Healthcare, which operates Cumberland County's only hospital, in Vineland. She said it is not surprising that many residents in the region, and

particularly those in economically troubled Cumberland County, turn to smoking to cope with their problems.

“Smoking cigarettes is one way to get a drug into the system that helps people with anxiety,” Pirollo said. “Nicotine is a very powerful drug. It can help (people) cope with the various consequences of not having a job, not having enough money coming in, having substance abuse problems in the family, not having reliable transportation and health problems.”

“You have to think of nicotine as a drug, and the cigarette as the drug delivery system,” she said. “Until people can find other ways to cope with the stress of living in an environment that has more stresses than normal, I think you will see those people smoking more. It’s just the whole idea that they can self-medicate and go to the convenience store and buy a package of cigarettes and actually feel better.”

Mascia said the society understands that there are “clear economic issues that can impact a person’s decision in regards to smoking cigarettes.”

Adding to the problem is that it is easy for many South Jersey residents to buy cigarettes more cheaply in Delaware than they can in New Jersey, said Sandra Murray, a tobacco dependence treatment specialist with South Jersey Healthcare.

“A 20-minute ride and they’re over the Delaware Memorial Bridge and into Delaware,” she said.

And some South Jersey residents are turning to even more affordable ways to smoke by ordering cigarettes from Native American reservations, Murray said, adding that they are also rolling their own cigarettes.

Customers at McLaughlin’s News in Vineland said Friday that while they know a lot of Cumberland County residents smoke, they were surprised by the county adult smoking rate.

Vineland resident Lott Thompson, a 67-year-old retired factory worker, said he started smoking when he was 17 because it was just something that many of his friends did. He said he has weaned his habit down to less than a pack per day.

“Not worried,” Thompson, who had just bought a pack of cigarettes, said when asked whether he was concerned about health problems linked to smoking. “Not worried at all.”

Thompson said his smoking habit is at least better than the two packs of cigarettes his girlfriend smokes each day.

Another Vineland resident, 79-year-old Henry Clark, also said he started smoking when he was 17. He said that while he has stopped smoking several times, the latest being three years ago, he is not sure whether he will again light up a tobacco product.

Murray said efforts are ongoing to help people quit smoking — something that is not easily accomplished.

“Many of them started young,” Murray said. “Now they’re in their 35th year of smoking and ... dealing with cancer issues. Some just can’t do it.”

But Mascia said cancer research — such as the long-term study just under way — and smoking cessation efforts are necessary to perhaps one day eliminate the disease.

“We’re looking to finish the fight,” he said. “We’ve come a long way.”

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