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Minorities see more cancer

Rates up among blacks, American Indians due to increased use of tobacco products

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Lung cancer mortality and incidence rates are higher for some of the state's racial and ethnic minority groups due to tobacco use, according to Wisconsin Department of Health Services statistics released this week.

Between 2001 and 2005, blacks had the highest lung cancer incidence rates of any racial group, with black males having about an 80 percent higher incidence rate than their white counterparts. American Indians had the second-highest incidence rates.

Blacks also have the highest lung cancer mortality rates, followed by American Indians and whites.

DHS is using this week, Minority Cancer Awareness Week, to help raise awareness about health disparities between racial and ethnic groups, spokesperson Seth Boffeli said.

"Especially in light of the initiatives that have the goal of reducing smoking across the state, we felt this was a good opportunity to highlight the stark disparities in the different ethnic groups," Boffeli said. "African-Americans are almost two times as likely to be smokers."

According to Boffeli, there are a variety of reasons for this, including socioeconomic conditions as well as problems with minority access to health care.

Director of Public Policy and Communications for the American Lung Association in Milwaukee Dona Wininsky said she believes minorities have higher instances of lung cancer because they are more likely to be targeted by tobacco advertisers.

"The tobacco companies put out flavored cigarettes ... all sorts of flavors that appeal to kids and make them more attractive to particular segments of the market," Wininsky said.

To help curb lung cancer rates overall, Wininsky advocated giving the U.S. Food and Drug Administration control over the marketing of tobacco products. Although the FDA was given control of tobacco products in the 1990s, the Supreme Court eventually declared such regulation unconstitutional.

The state as well as the American Lung Association have a variety of cessation programs to encourage citizens to stop smoking.

At the state level, DHS has an upcoming media campaign focused in Milwaukee to help reduce minority smoking, Boffeli said. The DHS plans to use things like billboards and advertisements on buses and the radio to encourage individuals to stop smoking.

The American Lung Association works to train individuals who then go on to work with specific populations, including black and American Indian communities, to help curb smoking. The association is currently doing more outreach to various communities to expand the program, Director of Program Services Michelle Mercure said.

The association also runs a Freedom from Smoking campaign at the community level as well as a toll-free health line that offers cessation counseling and offers way to help get nicotine replacement therapy, Mercure added.

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