Youth risk survey also tackles distracted driving, bullying

Nebraska high school students appear to be engaging in less risky behavior than in previous years according to results from Nebraska's 2011 Youth Risk Behavioral Survey (YRBS).

Some of the areas showing greatest improvement since the survey began in 1991 include tobacco and alcohol use and alcohol-impaired driving.

"We're pleased to see declines in tobacco and alcohol use among high school students in Nebraska," said Dr. Joann Schaefer, Nebraska's Chief Medical Officer and Director of Public Health for the Department of Health and Human Services. "Ongoing prevention efforts are working but there's still more work to do including addressing a lack of nutrition and physical activity."

Alcohol and tobacco use in particular saw large improvements over the past 20 years, especially 2005-2011:

Cigarette smoking during the past 30 days declined from 29% in 1991 to 22% in 2005 to 15% in 2011.

Lifetime smoking declined from 72% in 1991 to 53% in 2005 to 39% in 2011.

Alcohol use during the past 30 days declined from 53% in 1991 to 43% in 2005 to 27% in 2011.

Drinking and driving during the past 30 days declined from 23% in 1991 to 17% in 2005 to 7% in 2011.

Sedentary behavior and poor eating habits continue to be common practice for many high school students:

Only about half (54%) get the recommended amount of physical activity.

Less than one in five (17%) consume fruits and vegetables five or more times per day.

Two-thirds (66%) consume sugar-sweetened beverages one or more times per day.

Half (50%) spend three or more hours on an average school day watching television, playing video games, or using the computer for non-school work.

“Poor health and risky behavior choices can be barriers to learning,” said Dr. Roger Breed, Nebraska’s commissioner of education. “Understanding and addressing these barriers systematically will help maximize the academic performance of Nebraska students.”

New to the 2011 survey were questions on distracted driving, including texting and talking on a cell phone:

Nearly half (45%) of all high school students texted or e-mailed while driving during the past 30 days, while half (49%) talked on a cell phone while driving. These percentages jumped to 70% and 75%, respectively, among high school seniors.

The 2011 survey included two questions on bullying:

One in four (23%) students were bullied on school property during the past 12 months while one in six (16%) were bullied electronically (e.g., e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, web sites, or texting).

Bullied students were far more likely than students not bullied to report depression, suicidal thoughts or attempted suicide during the past 12 months.

The 2011 Nebraska YRBS surveyed 3,832 public high school students in grades 9-12 during the fall of the 2010-11 school year. The survey focused primarily on injury and violence; mental health and suicide; tobacco, alcohol, and drug use; sexual behaviors; weight management; dietary behaviors; and physical activity.

Data from the YRBS is used for planning and evaluating prevention programs for youth in Nebraska.

The YRBS is one of three school-based student health surveys administered under the Nebraska Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) Surveillance System. SHARP is a coordinated effort between DHHS and the Nebraska Department of Education.

The goal is to lessen the burden surveys place on schools and to improve participation in all three surveys. The next SHARP administration will occur in the fall of the 2012-13 school year.