

UW School of Medicine and Public Health: Wisconsin's obesity map: The ZIP codes weigh in

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MADISON, Wis. – Health researchers have compiled a searchable map of obesity in America's Dairyland by ZIP code, and the picture is alarming.

Wisconsin is the first state with a detailed ZIP Code-level obesity map based on electronic health record data, meaning it is based on height and weight measurements taken when people are at their doctors' offices, rather than self-reported heights and weights, says Dr. Vincent Cryns, a UW Health endocrinologist and leader of the Wisconsin Obesity Prevention Initiative (OPI).

A map of Wisconsin's "obesity epidemic" goes live today at www.wihealthatlas.org, allowing people to search by ZIP Code to see how their neighborhood compares to others.

Cryns and his team will unveil and explain the searchable map during a Facebook Live interview today at 11 a.m. CDT. Join the conversation at <https://www.facebook.com/uwhealth/>

"The big picture of the obesity epidemic in Wisconsin is quite disconcerting: obesity is even more common than we thought based on self-reported information," says Cryns, who researches how obesity leads to other diseases like cancer and

diabetes.

Overall, almost 42 percent of adults and 15 percent of children in Wisconsin are obese, a rate that makes Wisconsin about average among states. But obesity rates in Wisconsin vary by dramatically by age and ZIP Code.

Adult obesity rates by ZIP Code range from 15.9 percent to 67.2 percent, meaning adults living in some ZIP Codes are more than 4 times more likely to be obese than people in other ZIP Codes. In general, rural areas have higher obesity rates than urban and suburban areas. The child obesity maps mirror the adult maps, showing that where obesity is a problem for adults, children are also more likely to be obese.

“The variation is striking,” says Hilary Joyner, who directed the map project for OPI. “The disparity in rural areas could be due to lower availability and affordability of healthy food and the fact that people drive everywhere; there aren’t nearby destinations that rural residents can easily walk to or bike to. It may not be safe to bike or walk on some rural roads, and we’ve heard that some folks are concerned how it looks to be biking or walking because people may assume you’ve lost your driver’s license.”

Cryns says the map is a first step in identifying the communities most affected by obesity where resources could be targeted to do a better job creating opportunities for health. In addition, future mapping of the obesity prevalence will allow researchers to determine if local programs and policies to support healthy weight are working.

“These maps are sobering, but without data you don’t know where to focus your efforts,” he says. “We need to think about ways to plan our communities so it’s easier to be physically active and eat healthy food. This map is really a resource for people, public health leaders and physicians, and a fresh approach to solving this epidemic.”

The maps are part of the larger Wisconsin Health Atlas project, and a collaborative between OPI, the Health Innovation Program and the Wisconsin Collaborative for Healthcare Quality. The maps do have some gaps, particularly in Racine and Kenosha counties and in the Wisconsin counties bordering the Twin Cities, where the health systems’ data was not available for analysis at this time.

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