

The Health Behaviors of the Aging US Worker: The National Health Interview Survey (NHIS)

Objectives

As the US workforce ages, lifestyle factors will increasingly affect their health, yet little information is available on their prevalence in aging working populations.

Methods

Using the nationally representative 1997-2003 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), reported current smoking, risky drinking and leisure-time physical activity behaviors of current older workers were compared with younger workers and older non workers. These behaviors were evaluated by gender, race, ethnicity and occupation, as well as prototype “healthy” and “risky” workers.

Results

The study population represented an estimated 123,052,357 younger workers, 3,917,960 older workers, and 28,879,284 older non-workers annually between 1997-2003. Older workers reported less current smoking and risky drinking than younger workers, but not compared to older non workers. Leisure-time physical activity was inadequate in all subpopulations. There were variations by gender, race, ethnicity, and occupation among the different US worker subpopulations.

Discussion and Recommendations

The 2010 Healthy People Recommendations are focused on behavior prevention and education particularly related to tobacco and ethanol use, and physical activity in obesity prevention. With a rapidly aging US worker population, all industries need to evaluate the healthy and risky behaviors of their workforce. Certain occupations, as well as gender-race-ethnic subpopulations of both workers and non workers, can be targeted for age-appropriate behavior prevention interventions.