



Preventing Heart Disease and Stroke



Summary of **Youth Focus Groups** with People Living in Minnesota



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Background

Executive Summary

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) will soon be developing a five-year strategic plan to reduce heart disease and stroke in Minnesota. To prepare for this task, decision-makers wanted to better understand how people living in Minnesota think and feel about:

- ... Heart disease and stroke
- ... Heart healthy eating recommendations
- ... Heart healthy exercise/physical activity recommendations
- ... Smoking
- ... Methods to prevent heart disease and stroke

Focus group interviews were conducted with African Americans, American Indians, Caucasians, Hispanics/Latinos, Hmong, and Somalis to get a better understanding of their perspective on these issues.

In addition to integrating these findings into the strategic plan, the MDH will share the findings so that local practitioners, clinicians, health educators and planners can review them and incorporate them into their own initiatives and services in order to prevent heart disease and stroke.

Population	Location	# of Youth Groups	# of Adult Groups	Total Groups
American Indian	Reservation 1	2	3	5
	Reservation 2	2	3	5
	Urban	2	3	5
Caucasian	Rural	2	2	4
	Urban	2	2	4
African American	Urban	2	2	4
Hispanic	Rural	1	2	3
Hmong	Urban	1	2	3
Somali	Urban		1	1
Total Groups		14	20	34

The study concentrated on the population at highest risk of cardiovascular disease – American Indians – but also listened to others throughout the state. In total, 261 people participated in the focus groups. Focus group participants included adults (ages 30 to 55) and youth (ages 11 to 18). However, some of the American Indian adults included elders who were older than 55. Attendance for the focus groups was between four to eleven participants. On average, the adult groups lasted about two hours and the youth groups lasted about one-and-a-half hours.

Community members and community organizations were hired to help recruit participants for the groups. Focus group participants were recruited from churches, schools, or community organizations (African American, urban white). Recruiters also used their own networks to find participants (American Indian, rural white, Hispanic, Hmong, Somali).

All participants signed consent forms agreeing that they understood their comments might be included in a cardiovascular health report and used during the development of a strategic plan, and also understood that no names will be attached to the comments. A parent or guardian's signature was required for youth to participate in a focus group. Participants received a monetary incentive for participation in the focus groups.

The questions that were used during the focus groups are included in this summary. Please note that in some circumstances these questions were re-worded or re-phrased for various ethnic groups in order to allow for clarity and to generate conversation.

In some cases community members who had been trained to conduct focus groups were also hired to moderate the groups (urban American Indian, African American, Hmong).

MDH received permission from the Tribal Council Boards to host focus groups on the reservations.

Mary Anne Casey, Ph.D., moderated or assisted in all of the groups. Having one focus group facilitator who coordinated and attended all groups helped support consistency and made the analysis of information easier. Each group was audiotaped. Transcripts and notes from the groups were used for analysis.

Recommendations for planning cardiovascular health programs

Community members provided many wonderful suggestions about what might help people to be more active and eat healthier foods. MDH recognizes the richness in this information and encourages practitioners, clinicians, health educators and planners to carefully consider these recommendations in program planning.

Consider a social marketing approach. Education alone is not enough to get most people to change. Look to decrease the barriers that community members identified and increase the incentives for change. A well-rounded approach is needed to address educational, institutional, financial, emotional, social, and cultural barriers and incentives.

Consider a campaign to reframe how people think about:

- × Heart disease and stroke
People think “it won’t happen to me” or “I have time. Heart disease happens to older people, so I can exercise and eat right later in my life when I have more time.” People are less likely to believe there can be a problem if they feel healthy.
- × Exercise
People associate exercise with weight loss and with going to the gym. Many also believe exercise is boring and hard to do. People believe they will not feel comfortable at a gym and therefore are less likely to go.
- × Eating heart healthy food
People currently see eating healthy food as expensive, inconvenient, restrictive, and bland. Eating healthy foods is seen as a diet.

Reframe heart disease so younger people, particularly women, believe it is important. Try to promote exercise and eating healthy foods in more positive ways. Also, consider encouraging exercise around being healthy rather than around losing weight.

Consider approaches that focus on groups of people: families, church members, employees, school children, neighborhoods, communities, health plan members. Having others around for support helps people to make lifestyle changes.

Consider approaches that are fun. Hispanic/Latino community members suggested having “parties” at community members’ homes to teach families about heart disease, offer cooking classes, taste healthy foods, and get heart healthy recipes. These parties might also be adapted for other communities. Be creative and think of other fun approaches.

Consider using program facilitators and leaders who have superior social skills. Having program staff that is knowledgeable in heart health information is important, but having program staff that is socially skilled may be equally or more important. Program participants need support, encouragement, and a smiling face to make the experience more enjoyable.

Summary from Youth Groups

Fourteen youth focus groups were conducted as part of the study. Of the fourteen focus groups, six were with American Indian youth, four with Caucasian youth, two with African American youth, one with Hispanic youth, and one with Hmong youth. A focus group was not conducted with Somali youth. For the focus groups, the youth were typically divided into different age groups; youth 11 to 14 years old were in one group and youth 15 to 18 years old in another group. The youth were not separated by gender, however, some groups were all female, some were all male, and some had both genders.

Findings from all the Youth Focus Groups

Focus group interviews revealed that youth responses differed more based on age than on race/ethnicity.

Most of the 11-14 year old youth still expressed a close connection to family and school. This younger group of youth stated that they listen to their parents, brothers and sisters, and teachers. This close connection to family and school also has a lot of influence and control over the behavior of this younger group of youth. If this group of youth were told or forced to do things, they said they would do them. Also, they said that rules and bribes influence their behavior.

As the young people gained independence, friends became a much bigger influence in their lives. Young people said their behaviors really change when they can drive, or become more involved in school activities or work. Less time is spent with their families and more time is spent around friends. Older youth said they would try things if they looked fun/cool or if their friends encouraged them. A few said that even as friends become more important, they still considered what their parents would want them to do when making decisions.

The youth were asked questions about being physically active, eating healthy foods, smoking and chewing tobacco, whom they listen to, and if they think about prevention. The following is a summary of what was said:

Being Physically Active

Question: What would help you be more physically active at school?

Most youth say they are physically active but the only time to be active during school is gym or recess. Youth said they would be more active during gym or recess if:

- ... Gym and/or recess were longer.
- ... Gym was every day.
- ... Gym class was required.
- ... They had to be active in gym or at recess (some kids don't participate).
- ... They got a reward for being active.
- ... Gym was fun (some say they don't like the activities in gym).
- ... They got to choose from various activities.
- ... Gym included fewer lectures.
- ... College requirements or graduation requirements weren't so demanding, they might have time for gym.
- ... Teachers encouraged them to be physically active before/during/after school.
- ... The gym was open before school (and at other times) for students to use. (Some schools did open the gym for students to use before school. Students said the boys play basketball and the girls watch. The girls said they don't play because the boys are aggressive and tell them they are not good enough to play.)

They also said they might be more active at school if:

- ... Lunch was longer so they could eat more, have more energy, and feel more like being active. Some kids said lunch period was too short to eat all their food.
- ... They slept more so they would feel like being active.

Question: What would help you be more physically active after school and on weekends?

Some kids said they are active in organized sports after school. They said they got involved because:

- ... Someone invited/encouraged them:
 - A friend asked them to join
 - A coach asked them to join
 - A parent encouraged them
- ... It looked like fun
- ... They tried it and liked it:
 - They enjoy the sport
 - They enjoy the competition
- ... They had played the game since they were little

Most of the young people were not active in organized sports. They said they are not involved because:

- ... It is so competitive that it isn't fun.
- ... They aren't good enough and other kids will make fun of them.
- ... Kids have to start a sport when they are young. If they wait, they are too far behind and don't have the skills the other kids have.
- ... They have to work and/or do homework and don't have time.
- ... It costs too much to be in organized sports; families can't afford it.
- ... Their parents didn't encourage it.

Kids who were not in organized sports said they play outside when the weather is nice but once it gets cold they become inactive. Youth said they would be more active after school and on weekends if:

- ... Friends invited them to play something they like.
- ... Parents made them go outside and play.
- ... They had less homework or did not have to work.
- ... They got incentives for being active.
- ... They had safe places to play close to home so they could walk:
 - × Friends' yards
 - × Parks
 - × Schools
 - × Recreation centers with free membership
 - × Sidewalks so they don't have to worry about cars when walking or playing
- ... There were other organized, low cost activities offered and publicized:
 - × Schools offered more intramural activities after school just for fun.
 - × Organizations offered more activities like rollerblading, skiing, bowling, swimming.
 - × Schools offered more social dances (Hispanic/Latino youth).
 - × Faith communities sponsored more activities (African American youth).
 - × Families organized get-togethers (Native American youth).
- ... They had more equipment at home: balls, games, weights.
- ... They had a pet to play with.

Almost every youth group, with the exception of one tribal reservation group, said that if they were going to get kids to be more active or eat better or smoke less they would build a recreation center. Many of the kids complained that there was not enough for kids to do in their neighborhood or town. Even kids who had earlier in the discussion been complaining about how they had no free time said there was not enough to do.

Question: What would help you be more physically active during the summer?

The answers given here were very similar to the answers given above. In addition youth said **they would be more active in the summer if:**

- ... Their friends wanted to be active.
- ... The school facilities were open for them to use.
- ... There were clean, low cost or free swimming pools close by.
- ... They got to go to day camp or camp.
- ... Their community held more festivals and fairs for people to be involved in.
- ... There were more clubs that offered activities.
- ... There were more family activities.
- ... There were places for young people to go eat, listen to music, play games, dance.
- ... They had better transportation.

Eating Healthy Foods

Most kids said they would eat healthy foods if they were the only option, but if given a choice, they would choose foods that tasted better to them—high fat, high sugar, high salt foods.

In general, **the youth said they would eat healthier foods if the foods were:**

- ... Appealing (looked or smelled good).
- ... Better tasting.
- ... Prepared and ready to eat (e.g., even if they loved melon, they would not cut one up to eat it).
- ... The first thing they saw when they were hungry.
- ... Cheaper than other foods (they said healthy foods—salads, milk, juice—are more expensive at fast food places).
- ... Their only option.

The youth said they would usually order pop instead of milk or juice because the serving of pop was bigger than the serving of milk or juice, so they got more for their money. Similarly, they would not buy water instead of pop because water should not cost as much as pop—so you are not getting your money's worth.

The youth said parents, schools, and coaches can have a big influence on what kids eat.

Kids said if you want them to eat healthy food, do not call it healthy; rather say it tastes good. Also, food labeled “low fat” is more appealing than “healthy” for some kids.

Question: What would help you to eat healthier foods, like fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and less high fat food and junk food at school?

Youth said they would eat healthier foods at school if:

- ... The school served healthier foods. Kids said much of what is offered is high in fat or low in nutrients: burgers, fries, Italian dunkers, chips, pop.
- ... Only healthy foods were served.
- ... The healthy foods looked appealing. Kids complained that the fruits, salads, vegetables, etc. didn't look fresh.
- ... They offered more variety of foods that kids like (e.g., different kinds of fruit, yogurt, bagels).
- ... They knew no one else had touched the food. Some kids wouldn't take fruit from a display because other kids might have touched it.
- ... There were "rules" to make students eat healthy things. These rules were offered by some of the younger participants in the focus groups:
 - × The teachers made kids eat everything on their tray.
 - × The teachers told them what they had to eat on their tray.
 - × If kids had to eat the healthy foods to get the junk food they want.
 - × Kids could only bring healthy snacks.
- ... Lunchtime was longer so they could eat everything.
- ... Lines for food weren't so long (Some kids would grab chips and pop because the line for them was shorter than the line for other options.)
- ... They brought a bag lunch.
- ... The vending machines were rethought.
 - × There weren't so many pop and candy machines.
 - × More water, juice, and healthy snacks were in the machines (e.g., yogurt, baby carrots and dip).
 - × Healthy options were cheaper than unhealthy options.
- ... School events (meets, tournaments, etc.) offered healthier options. Some young athletes complained that it was hard to get something healthy at after-school activities. If athletes compete at an all-day wrestling match or an all-evening volleyball game, they may only be able to buy hot-dogs, pop, chips, and bars.

Question: What would help you to eat healthier foods, like fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and less high fat food and junk food at home?

Some young people, particularly the older ones, said they have "stashes" of food (pop, candy, chips) in their bedroom and/or in their car. Young people bought this food themselves or their parents bought the food and the kids just took them to their room/car. Kids stashed foods that keep well and are easy to eat in these conditions. Fruit would not keep well and be messy to eat. And juices and milk would not keep either, however, pop does keep.

Youth said they would eat more healthy foods at home if:

- ... That's all parents brought home.
- ... Parents made and ate healthy foods.
- ... Parents hid the junk food.
- ... Parents were strict and forced them or bribed them to eat healthy foods.

- ... Parents did things to make the healthy foods more appealing.
- ... Healthy foods were fast, convenient, and the first thing they saw: cleaned, cut up, and ready to eat.
- ... There were dips or dressings to make the healthy foods more appealing.
- ... Parents incorporated healthy foods into foods kids like (e.g., vegetables into the lasagna).
- ... Coaches told them it is important to eat healthy things and gave them information about what to eat to play their best.

Question: What would help you to eat healthier foods, like fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and less high fat food and junk food when you go out to eat?

Youth like fast food restaurants, such as Burger King, McDonald's, KFC, Wendy's, or Hardee's, and typically order burgers, fries, or some type of fried chicken (e.g., nuggets, sandwich). Subway was also mentioned by some girls for lower fat options. And Old Country Buffet was noted by several youth as a favorite spot.

Young people said they would eat more healthy foods when they went out if:

- ... There were monetary incentives to eat healthy foods.
 - × They had to pay for junk food with their own money.
 - × Restaurants charged less for healthy foods and more for junk foods.
 - × They could get the same quantity of milk or juice for the price of pop.
- ... There were other convenient, fast, healthy restaurants. Some girls complained that Subway was too slow when they were in a hurry.
- ... Restaurants made it easier to choose healthy options.
 - × Restaurants put the healthy foods where youth would notice them.
 - × Restaurants prepared the foods youth like in healthier ways.
 - × The healthier foods looked attractive (complaints about how salads look awful).
 - × Youth could buy fruit at restaurants.
- ... Parents said youth could only order healthy items.
- ... They developed a taste for healthy foods, like salads.
- ... They weren't too hungry. (Boys said salads don't fill them up.)

Tobacco Use

Question: What would help people your age not start smoking or chewing tobacco?

Knowledge and fear—young people said that knowing what happens to you if you smoke may deter some kids from smoking, but that the knowledge needs to be graphic. Youth kept saying "show," "show," "show." However, some youth said they had seen the same picture of a bad lung over and over again and it had lost its effectiveness.

In EMT class we saw a lung that was black. You could see how tough it was and gross. They had the heart that went with it. It made me sick. I had to leave the room. You can't do it with a picture. Don't bring in a picture and say, 'This is a bad lung.' That never made a difference. I held it. If you can hold it and say, 'This will be my lung some day.' (Rural white youth)

Youth said these things might keep kids from smoking:

- ... Fear
 - × Have serious consequences for getting caught smoking (Some of the younger youth suggested physical punishment)
 - × Show them a computer-generated image of what they will look like in the future if they smoke
 - × Show them how smoke enters the lungs
 - × Show them real lungs and hearts of smokers versus non-smokers
 - × Show them a dead body of a smoker
 - × Some said they had relatives who got sick or died from smoking and that keeps them from smoking
- ... Education
 - × Have teachers, coaches, and parents tell them not to smoke
 - × Begin education with first graders
 - × Have people who have experienced a smoking related illness talk to youth
- ... Financial cost
 - × Increase the cost of cigarettes
- ... Social options
 - × Youth suggested having lots of activities for kids, because those who are more active don't smoke as much
 - × Get youth involved in sports because it is harder to be good in a sport and smoke
 - × Have coaches reinforce the importance of not smoking
 - × Don't hang around kids who smoke
 - × Know how to say no when friends begin smoking
- ... Barriers to cigarettes
 - × Make it harder for kids to buy cigarettes (Some said it is too easy for kids to buy cigarettes from corner stores or from friends who are working as cashiers)
 - × Make it harder for kids to get cigarettes at home (Some kids said they took cigarettes from their parent's supply)
- ... Role models
 - × Young people said they need role models of nonsmoking older youth and adults who they respect.
 - × Involve famous people in a no-smoking campaign.

Question: What would help people your age stop smoking or chewing tobacco?

The youth had few answers to this question. Some said it was hard to stop because they were stressed and cigarettes helped calm them.

One girl said it was hard to stop because her boyfriend smoked and she would get second-hand smoke anyway, therefore she might as well smoke. Several teenagers said it is hard not to smoke if your friends are going out for a smoke—“What are you supposed to do while they smoke?”

A few people said support groups might help. Others said they would not join a support group because they believe the group would not be confidential, even if promoters promised it would be.

Some suggested that making the patch available through school counselors might help kids stop smoking.

Making a bet or making a competition to see who could quit was also mentioned as ways to motivate kids to stop smoking.

A lot of youth discussed how it is impossible to get someone to quit smoking if they do not want to quit; many felt it was futile.

Messages

Question: You get messages about eating, physical activity, and smoking from a lot of different places—your parents, your brothers and sisters, your friends, elders, faith community, teachers, coaches, magazines, TV, music. What or who do you pay attention to?

Youth, ages 11-14, tended to say they listen to parents, teachers, and siblings. Older youth tended to say they pay more attention to friends. Some said they filter things through what family members might think. Kids who were involved in sports said they listened to coaches. African American kids said they also listened to church leaders. American Indian youth said they pay attention to relatives and elders. Some of the kids also said they paid attention to ads on TV and radio, and to music messages.

Prevention

Question: Do you think that what you do now will make any difference in how healthy you'll be 30 years from now?

Students said they believe what they do now will make a difference later, but believing this does not influence their behaviors today. Few kids said they think about their health now; kids just don't worry about their health. Some students thought technology would advance enough so that whatever problems they developed could be fixed.

Focus group study team

Special thanks to the community members who helped organize, host, and conduct the focus group interviews:

Bonnie Allard – Fond du Lac Reservation

Chlene Anderson – Rural White Groups

Debbie Beckman – Fond du Lac Reservation

Phyllis Braxton – African American Groups

Connie Jorgensen – Red Lake Reservation

Charly Leuze – Hispanic/Latino Groups

Cheryl Schoenborn – Red Lake Reservation

Deb Smith – Fond du Lac Reservation

Sharon Smith – Urban American Indian Groups

Barbara Omaha – Urban American Indian Groups

Nadifa Osman – Somali Group

Mai Neng Vang – Hmong Groups

Cardiovascular Health Study Youth Focus Group Questions

1. What do you like to do in your free time?
2. What do you usually eat at school for lunch and snacks?
3. What would help you eat healthier foods, like fruits and vegetables, dairy products, or grains: [capture answers on flip chart]
 - a. at school.
 - b. at home (for meals and snacks).
 - c. when you go out to eat.
4. What would help you be more physically active: [write their answers on flip chart]
 - a. at school.

What do you usually do after school or on weekends?

- b. What would get you to be more active after school and on weekends?
- c. during the summer.

5. What would help kids:

- a. not start smoking or chewing tobacco.
- b. stop smoking or chewing tobacco.

6. Think of a time when you changed in some way. You tried some new food, or you quit doing something, or you bought something. What got you to make that change?

7. Do you think it is important to be healthy? Do you think that what you do now will make any difference in how healthy you will be 30 years from now or do you think that by then they will just be able to fix whatever is wrong?

8. You get messages about eating, physical activity, and smoking from a lot of different places—your parents, your brothers and sisters, school, church, coaches, magazines, TV, music, your friends. What do you pay attention to?

9. If you were in charge of getting kids like you to eat healthy foods, be physically active, and not smoke or chew tobacco, what would you do?

