

Tennessee 43rd in America's Senior Health Rankings as food security remains a challenge

Tennessee ranks 43rd among the nation's 50 states when it comes to the health of its senior citizens, according to a report from the United Health Foundation.

The foundation's report, part of its annual America's Health Rankings, considers the risk factors of obesity, physical inactivity, food security and poverty. Seniors are currently the largest consumers of health care, the report said.

Tennessee, with a senior population of about 1.2 million, dropped from 42 to 43 in this year's Senior Edition of America's Health Rankings. Tennessee's strengths include a low prevalence of chronic drinking, a high percentage of social support, and high flu vaccination coverage.

However, Tennessee has its challenges. Tennessee has the second highest rate of smoking among seniors in the country, at 12.5 percent. Roughly 17.9 percent of Tennessee's elderly have limited access to food, worry about running out of food, or have a limited food selection because of lack of money. Tennessee's other challenges include a lack of healthcare and a high percentage of preventable hospitalizations among the elderly.

Minnesota is the healthiest state for older adults for a second consecutive year. Minnesota has the lowest prevalence of seniors with cognitive difficulties in the United States. Its other strengths include the highest percentage of dental visits, a low prevalence of hunger among its elderly, and the highest percentage of able-bodied seniors.

The least healthy state for older adults for the second year in a row is Mississippi. Approximately 13.5 percent of Mississippi's seniors are living in poverty. Half of Mississippi's senior population does not visit the dentist. Although Mississippi struggles in these areas, it is in 4th place for the lowest rate of chronic drinking among seniors in the country, and high flu vaccination coverage.

Overall, the quality of the nation's nursing homes and end-of-life care is improving. Seniors have also become more active and are taking more measures to cut back on avoidable hospitalization.

As a nation, we still struggle with chronic conditions such as Alzheimer's, dementia, and diabetes. According to America's Health Ranking, "nearly 80 percent of seniors have already been diagnosed with at least 1 chronic condition and half have been diagnosed with at least 2 conditions." The development of chronic conditions increases seniors' consumption of health care. Improving the health and quality of life of seniors would reduce their overall health care consumption.

To compare Tennessee's ranking with other states, visit www.americashealthrankings.org/Senior/TN.