Regional Differences in Physical, Mental, and Dental Health Across the Rural U.S.

Health Care in Rural America

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

A survey of U.S. adults age 40 and older who were living in the rural parts of the country was fielded between November 20 and December 18, 2020 to take a deeper look at their health attitudes, behaviors, and concerns. This fact sheet focuses on regional differences in their physical, mental, and dental health.

INTRODUCTION

There are significant regional differences among adults 40 and older living in rural areas, from their health conditions, to their access to physical and mental health services, to the frequency with which they visit the doctor. Those living in the Northeast seem to have better health overall, perhaps due to their more frequent doctor's visits, not delaying medical care when needed, and discussing preventive health measures, such as diet and exercise, with their doctor.

KEY FINDINGS

Adults 40 and older in the rural Northeast are healthier compared to those in other regions of the country. Adults 40 and older living in rural America, for the most part, believe they are in good health, with two-fifths (42%) saying their health is “excellent” or “very good.” However, one-quarter (26%) say their health is only “fair” or “poor.” Those in the Northeast are more likely than those in the South to state their health is “excellent” or “very good” (55% vs. 36%).

A new study examines regional differences in overall health among adults 40 and older living in rural America.

Perception of overall health (n=1,504)

High blood pressure and arthritis are the most common ailments for rural adults 40 and older in our study, regardless of where they live. However, those living in the South are more likely than their peers around the country to suffer from a variety of other ailments—from diabetes to depression. This discrepancy may be due at least in part to rural adults 40 and older who live in the South being more likely than their counterparts to have household incomes of \$30,000 or less (41% in the South vs. 29% in the Midwest, 27% in the Northeast, and 26% in the West region). All too often, those with lower incomes also lack health insurance or are underinsured, delay or avoid seeking preventive medical care, or try to take care of the health problem on their own until it escalates into a more serious problem.

Ailments of adults 40-plus in rural areas, by region

Rural adults 40-plus in the South are more likely than their counterparts in the Midwest and West to have visited a doctor in the past three months (60% vs. 51% in the Midwest and 50% in the West).

Significantly more adults 40 and older in the rural Northeast report the main reason to see a doctor is for a regular check-up (68% vs. 57% in the Midwest and 52% in the South and West). This difference in “preventive maintenance” may help to explain the lower level of ailments cited by people in the rural Northeast. On the other hand, those in the Western and Southern rural regions of the country are more likely than those in the rural Northeast to say they have visited a doctor for other reasons, such as being sick (30% West and 23% South vs. 15% Northeast).

Rural adults 40-plus in the Northeast visit the doctor more often for regular check-ups while those in the West and South tend to do so for other reasons.

When visiting the doctor, the most common topics discussed among those who live in rural areas involve preventive health measures, such as immunizations (42%), exercise (37%), and diet and weight (32%). Notably, while there is little variability across regions in discussions about immunizations, exercise, or depression or anxiety, in the rural Northeast, two-fifths of adults 40-plus say they have discussed diet and weight with their doctor compared to about one-third of those in other regions (42% vs. 32% Midwest, 31% West, and 30% South).

Most common topics discussed with doctor (n=1,504)

Most common topics discussed when visiting doctor, by region

A significant minority of rural adults 40-plus delay seeking medical care. Nearly three in ten (28%) adults 40 and older in rural America say they have delayed seeking medical attention in the past two years, while about half as many (13%) did not seek medical care when needed. The top reasons cited for delaying or not getting medical care were concerns about not being able to socially distance due to the COVID-19 pandemic (27%), the cost of health care (22%), not having time (16%), or not being able to get an appointment (12%). Fewer mentioned reasons such as an inability to take time off from work (9%), lack of insurance (9%), or travel distances (6%).

Difficulties in paying medical bills vary by region.

One-fifth of rural adults 40-plus in the South cited having a problem paying medical bills for themselves or a family member, compared to about one in seven in the Northeast, Midwest, and West (20% vs. 13% for Northeast and Midwest; 15% for West).

Reasons for delaying or not seeking care (among those who did so=445)

While most adults 40 and older in rural areas have access to mental health services, those in the South are lagging slightly behind those in other regions (81% vs. 88% Northeast, 88% Midwest, 85% West). Even though access is similar in other regions, significantly more of those in the rural Northeast say they have discussed depression or anxiety with their doctors, compared to those in other regions, where one-fifth have done so (26% vs. 20% Midwest, 20% West, 19% South). This difference may be reflective of a greater openness in discussing one's mental health concerns with a healthcare professional.

Eight in ten adults 40 and older in rural America (84%) have access to mental health services.

More than six in ten adults 40 and older in the rural Northeast (66%) and rural Midwest (62%) say their mental health is "excellent" or "very good," far better than that cited by their counterparts in the rural South (54%), where more than one-fifth say they suffer from anxiety (24%) or depression (22%). Meanwhile, in the rural Northeast, about half as many say they suffer from these ailments (anxiety: 13%; depression: 10%).

Most adults 40-plus in rural America have visited the dentist in the past year. More than one-half (54%) of rural adults 40 and older have visited the dentist less than a year ago, one-fifth (20%) have done so between one and two years ago, and one-quarter (24%) went to a dentist more than three years ago. Only one percent of rural adults 40 and older say they've never been to the dentist at all. Those in the Northeast and Midwest (61% and 60%, respectively) are more likely than those in the South and the West (50% and 50%, respectively) to have visited the dentist less recently than a year ago.

For adults 40 and older living in rural areas, the reasons for visiting the dentist vary. Almost six in ten (58%) have visited a dentist for preventive reasons, including one-third (32%) who went in to get their teeth cleaned. Those in the Northeast (34%) and Midwest (29%) are more likely than those in the South (22%) to have visited the dentist for a regular check-up, while those in the South, perhaps because they don't visit the dentist regularly, are more likely than their counterparts in the Northeast to have had a tooth pulled or filled (20% vs. 12%) or needed an adjustment or repair of their dentures (14% vs. 8%).

Most rural adults 40-plus have not delayed or foregone dental care, but there are regional differences. One-quarter (26%) of rural adults 40 and older have delayed going to the dentist in the past two years, and one in six (16%) have forgone treatment even though they had a dental care need. Those in the South and West are more likely than those in the Midwest to both delay (31% West and 27% South vs. 22% Midwest) or skip (19% West and 18% South vs. 12% Midwest) dental care altogether

IMPLICATIONS

Rural adults 40 and over in the South and, to some extent, in the West seem to be suffering from more ailments than those in the Northeast and Midwest, perhaps driven by less frequent visits to the doctor for preventive measures. Encouraging more adults 40 and older to visit their doctors for regular check-ups in these regions and not waiting until they are sick could benefit their overall health and well-being.

Visiting the dentist every six months is the ideal timeframe for taking care of one's oral health. With about half of adults 40 and older in the West and South skipping visits for a year or more, promotion of more frequent dental visits is critical to improving the oral health of people in these regions and avoiding the complications that can arise from untreated oral issues.

METHODOLOGY

The data included in this report are drawn from the *Health Care in Rural America* study which was conducted by phone November 20-December 18, 2020 with a total sample of 1,504 adults ages 40-plus. This national survey was conducted for AARP by Alan Newman Research (ANR) Market Research Consultants. All data are weighted by age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and Census Division according to the 2019 5-year U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) estimates. The margin of error for the national survey is ± 2.5 percentage points. (Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.)

For more information on the methodology or the survey, contact Teresa A. Keenan at tkeenanaarp@aarp.org