

MONTANA

Keeping Track, Promoting Health

Building a Network

Without question environmental contaminants are affecting people's health. Environmental hazards are among parents' top health concerns for their children, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Understanding how these contaminants and other environmental factors are linked to chronic disease is essential to disease prevention—and to protecting the health of our communities.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is leading the initiative to build the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network. The Tracking Network is being developed in response to calls for better understanding of how the environment can affect people's health. This Web-based system will integrate health and environmental data and provide information to address public health concerns, educating the public about ways to protect themselves from possible contamination and disease.

States and communities can act upon data generated through tracking. Today, because of tracking, public health officials in Washington State can do more than determine mercury levels in fish. They can also compile information from many sources and use the data to educate citizens about healthy fish choices with greater speed and accuracy. In Maine, tracking has allowed researchers to examine high arsenic levels in well water and its effects on reproduction. Consequently, state public health officials can now warn well users about the hazards of exposure to arsenic during pregnancy.

The Tracking Network will enable and encourage communities, health care providers, state and local health departments and others to take control of their health.

The building blocks of this network are grants to state and local health departments and universities around the country to build capacity and demonstrate just what tracking can do.

Building the Foundation: Montana (2002 — 2006)

In 2002, the Montana Department of Health received funding from CDC to plan for a statewide Environmental Public Health Tracking Network. Montana used the funding to build capacity and enhance infrastructure. The results range from improving surveillance to enabling faster responses to environmental public health questions.

Why Tracking Matters to Montana

Because lead, radon, and arsenic occur naturally in Montana, statewide maps need to identify concentrations of these pollutants in relation to potentially exposed residents. To do this, the Montana Tracking Program first needed to create a framework for integrating environmental data with public health data. To create this tracking infrastructure, the Montana Tracking Program developed partnerships with the Montana State University Extension Services in Bozeman and the Montana Bureau of Mines at Montana Tech in Butte.



“So much has changed since the Pew Commission report,” says Shelley Hearne, Dr.P.H., founding executive director of Trust for America’s Health. “It’s phenomenal to see the rapid evolution from concept to implementation, from gap to engagement.”

Tracking in Action

What is the problem?

Monitoring Environmental Air Quality

Periodic increases in asthma in a three-county area of Western Montana were believed to be associated with air pollution caused by the state's mountainous topography and by forest fires.

What did tracking do?

The Montana Tracking Program conducted a linkage project on air quality and health effects. The project found that an increase in air pollution was associated with an increase in both hospital asthma visits and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease visits in the three-county area.

Improved public health

The Montana Tracking Program used information gathered from the linkage project to develop health advisories for distribution during forest fires and other times of poor air quality. This shows how tracking can link health and environment data to provide communities with appropriate health information.

Providing Children with Good Indoor Air Quality

Young children can spend more than 90 percent of their time indoors. Exposure to cigarette smoke or other indoor air pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide from gas heating and cooking appliances have been associated with increased incidence of respiratory symptoms in children.

Montana's Tracking Program, along with several state agencies and the Montana State University Extension Services, developed a checklist for daycare inspectors to use when conducting inspections. The checklist focused on environmental health factors, including the presence of cigarette smoke and mold, and exposure to lead and radon. Tracking staff developed a database into which they entered the results of their daycare inspections.

Environmentally friendly daycare providers now receive a window sticker that acknowledges they have reviewed the checklist and received educational materials. This lets parents know that protecting their children's indoor environment is important to the daycare provider. The checklist can be found at:
<http://www.dphhs.mt.gov/epht/daycarechecklist122005.pdf>



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Rd.
Atlanta, Georgia 30333, U.S.A.
Tel: (404) 639-3311
Public Inquiries: (404) 639-3534 / (800) 311-3435
Web: www.cdc.gov

For more information about the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program please visit: www.cdc.gov/nceh/tracking

