



Executive Summary

As this report, *A Measure of Health* outlines, overall, residents of York Region are a healthy group of people. The report provides a wide range of health-related information, drawing on multiple sources and primarily covering the five-year period from 1997 to 2002. In some instances, data from as far back as 1986 are included in order to demonstrate certain trends.

York Region residents score better than the Ontario average on almost every key health indicator: life expectancy, disability-free life expectancy, education, income, unemployment, obesity, proportion of low birth weight babies, smoking rates, cancer incidence rates, infectious disease rates, hospitalization rates and death rates. However, there is always room for improvement.

The following are selected highlights from each chapter of the report.

The Region is the fastest growing in the province, and the population includes a higher-than-average proportion of immigrants to Canada, compared to other parts of the province.

York Region has a culturally diverse population. Nearly 40% of the population are immigrants to Canada, compared to an Ontario average of about one-quarter (26.8%), according to the latest available figures.

The proportion of York Region residents with a university degree (19.7%) was higher than the Ontario average (15%). Of the Region's workforce, 46% had post-secondary education, compared to the Ontario average of 41%, according to the most recent data.

Education is a key determinant of health status, as more educated people - and populations - have a longer life expectancy. Other determinants include income (York Region has an average income level higher than that of the province), and levels of social support from community, friends and family.





It is estimated that air pollution will have caused the premature death of 88 York Region residents in 2002.

Our physical environment makes a significant contribution to our health status. Contaminants in air, water, food and soil can cause a variety of adverse health effects. Children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable to air pollutants. Because they play close to the ground, children are also more vulnerable to pesticides in their environment.

A key yardstick of the overall health status of a population is life expectancy. York Region residents have the longest life expectancy (81.8 years) in the province, according to 1999 figures.

When asked to evaluate their own health, 93% of residents surveyed report excellent, very good health, or good health, and only 7% report fair or poor health.

In 2000/2001, 23% of York Region's surveyed population 12 years and older reported being current smokers.

While the proportion of York Region smokers is slightly less than the Ontario average (24.5%), smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death in Canada. Education, support programs, and enforcement of relevant by-laws dealing with this risk factor remain a priority. Other modifiable personal behaviours that contribute to ill health include excessive consumption of alcohol and low levels of physical activity. Residents report consumption of alcohol at a lower level than the provincial average. However, improvement is required in the area of regular physical activity. Over 45% of York Region residents surveyed do not engage in regular physical activity, and lack of physical activity is one of three major risk factors for ischemic heart disease.

In 1999, York Region's low birth weight rate for singletons (3.9%) was lower than the Ontario average (4.5%).

An infant's weight at birth is one of the main determinants of its survival, healthy growth and development. The proportion of low birth weight babies is an indicator of the overall health of the population.

York Region death rate from all causes was the lowest in the province over the 10 year period 1990 to 1999 for all age groups.

The leading causes of death differ by age group. In York Region, the leading causes of death are: injuries (ages 1 to 34), cancer (ages 35 to 69) and cardiovascular diseases (age 70 and over).



The leading cause of death for both York Region males and females is ischemic heart disease.

Chronic diseases are the leading causes of death in York Region and in Ontario. More than three-quarters of the Region's population have one or more of the major risk factors (smoking, low levels of physical activity, unhealthy body weight) for heart disease, and these risk factors are also associated with other diseases such as lung cancer and diabetes.

Death rates from all injuries, motor vehicle collisions, accidental falls, and suicides among York Region residents were the lowest in Ontario between 1986 and 1999.

While often referred to as accidents, injuries typically occur because of circumstances, or for reasons, that can be prevented or modified. Motor vehicle collisions are the leading cause of injury-related death in York Region, followed by accidental falls and suicide.

York Region's rates of key infectious diseases, including sexually transmitted diseases and influenza, were lower than the Ontario average. However the Region had higher rates of two infections related to food and food preparation.

The rate of communicable diseases in a population is a good indicator of population health, since they are often correlated with socio-economic and environmental conditions. As in other public health units, it is vital to ensure diligent surveillance of new antibiotic resistant organisms, prevention and containment of outbreaks and efforts to prevent the spread of emerging infectious diseases.

69% of York Region residents age 12 years and over report that their lives are somewhat or quite stressful.

Despite experiencing stress levels comparable to the rest of the province, the overall mental health of York Region residents compares favourably with the provincial average, as 88% of residents surveyed, age 12 and over, report being happy with their lives.





86% of York Region residents age 18 and over surveyed reported making, or trying to make, an appointment to see a family doctor over a 12-month period. Of these, 15% reported having difficulty getting an appointment. This suggests that an estimated 76,000 residents had difficulty obtaining medical appointments in the past year.

Adequate access to health care allows people to receive preventative care, benefit from early detection of illness, and take advantage of timely treatment.

As these chapter highlights demonstrate, York Region fares very well compared to the Ontario average in most key health indicators. It also experiences many of the same adverse health conditions as the rest of the province, such as rates of smoking, motor vehicle collisions as a leading cause of injury, and frequency of poor air quality.

In order to improve and/or maintain this level of health in the future, one must recognize the challenges that will face York Region in the future. They include rapid population growth with a higher-than-average proportion of immigrants, an aging population, urbanization, and a widening income gap. All of these factors will influence the status of our health in the future.

Diligent monitoring of all the factors that influence health, with a special emphasis on the social determinants of health, must continue to be undertaken by the Health Services Department in conjunction with partner organizations and agencies. Sharing of data, obtained through surveillance of the population, is key to better health outcomes for York Region residents.

The York Region Health Services Department, working with others, will continue to promote, protect and enhance the health and safety of the people of York Region. The efforts of the Health Services Department fall within many of the goal areas of the Regional Municipality of York's Vision 2026 initiative. Those goal areas are: Quality Communities for a Diverse Population; Enhanced Environment, Heritage and Culture; Responding to the Needs of Our Residents; Managed and Balanced Growth; Infrastructure for a Growing Region; and Engaged Communities and a Responsive Region.

The improvement of health status is a collective and also an individual responsibility. In the Conclusion of the report is *Get Involved with your Health!*, a list of steps that individuals can take to improve their own and their community's health.