



# COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO NEWS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE PUBLICATION**  
April 20, 2009

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## **CANCER IS NEW LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH IN COUNTY** ***Progress Made on Heart Disease, Stroke and Infant Mortality;*** ***Obesity and Diabetes a Concern for Local Health Officials***

County elected and health officials announced today a decline in heart disease deaths, making cancer the new leading cause of death in San Diego County.

“Cancer is the new leading cause of death of San Diego County residents. However, it’s because heart disease deaths have decreased faster than cancer deaths,” announced Chairwoman Dianne Jacob, County Board of Supervisors, at a news conference outside the Health and Human Services Agency (HHS). Jacob was joined by Dr. Wilma Wooten, County Public Health Officer; Nick Macchione, HHS Director; and Dr. James Dunford representing the American Heart Association.

From 2003 to 2007, the number of heart disease deaths dropped 12 percent from 5,404 in 2003 to 4,743 in 2007. During the same period, the number of cancer deaths stayed fairly stable reaching 4,812 in 2007.

However, the total number of deaths does not tell the whole story about cancer. A better indicator for any disease is the death rate registered for every 100,000 people, which for cancer dropped from about 175 in 2003 to 162 in 2007. The 13 point drop in the death rate for cancer is a sign that progress is being made to combat this disease.

The federal government uses 10 lead indicators—Healthy People 2010—and more than two dozen focus areas to measure the health and well being of Americans across the country.

When comparing the County of San Diego with the federal government’s Healthy People 2010 goals, the County is exceeding many of the goals established for the nation.

For the first time in the history of the County, there is no longer a major disparity in stroke deaths among the different racial/ethnic groups.

“In 2003 there was a 45 point difference in the death rates for stroke between African-Americans and Whites. That gap has closed and the death rates have almost equalized among all groups,” said Wooten.

There is another area where death disparities have also begun to decrease.

The latest data we have shows that the Infant Mortality Rate for African Americans in 2006 was eight deaths for every 1,000 live births. That is the first time the rate has reached a single digit in San Diego County.

**(more)**



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“We’ll continue to monitor closely to determine if this trend holds. However, it is definitely another indication that the health disparities among the different groups are disappearing in the county,” added Wooten.

While progress has been made in many areas, there are two areas of concern for public health officials.

The percentage of obese people in San Diego County continues to increase and the number of hospitalizations because of diabetes also continues to escalate.

From 2003 to 2007, the number of obese adults increased from about 17 to 22 percent. When you add the number of overweight adults to that total, the percentage jumps to 55 percent. An estimated 1.2 million adults in San Diego County are overweight or obese.

“As is happening across the country, the waistlines of San Diego County residents are expanding. A greater number of adults are becoming overweight or obese,” said Macchione. “Obesity threatens the quality of life of individuals and places a real burden on our healthcare system.”

The increase in the number of obese San Diegans is especially troubling because obesity can lead to type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart disease, stroke and other illnesses.

On the issue of diabetes, the County had good news and bad news to report. The number of diabetes deaths declined in 2007 after a steady increase the previous four years. Another positive finding was that the death rate for diabetes for every major population group is below the national goal of 46 deaths for every 100,000 people.

The bad news on diabetes is that the number of hospitalizations has been steadily increasing for the past several years. The latest data available indicates that in 2006 there were 3,729 hospitalizations because of diabetes.

Preventing diabetes and other diseases is possible. Sometimes a few lifestyle changes will make the difference.

It’s important to remember that three behaviors—tobacco use, a poor diet and lack of physical activity—contribute to heart disease, type 2 diabetes, lung disease and many cancers, the four major chronic diseases that are responsible for more than 50 percent of deaths in the world.

“The tough economy is bringing more stress into people’s lives. But even in difficult economic times, it’s important for people to take care of their health,” said Wooten. “Avoid smoking, practice sun safety, eat fruits and vegetables, limit your fat and alcohol intake, and strive to be physically active every day.”

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