

# DoD Surveys of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Military Personnel

A COMPONENT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE LIFESTYLE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Since 1980, the Department of Defense (DoD) has collected information regarding behavioral and health readiness of active duty military personnel through the Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Military Personnel (HRB Surveys). In 2005, DoD initiated the Department of Defense Lifestyle Assessment Program (DLAP), which incorporated the active duty health behaviors study and expanded the scope to include the National Guard and Reserves, as well as other special studies, the first of which examined unit-level influences on alcohol and tobacco use. Findings from the program provide information on the fitness of the force, including estimates of alcohol, drug, and tobacco use; nutrition and physical activity; and critical assessments of emotional stress and other issues. Data are used to assess and document potential health and lifestyle issues pertaining to personnel, to track health-related trends, and to identify high-risk groups and areas needing additional screening or intervention. Results help leaders to better understand the nature, causes, and consequences of substance abuse and health practices in the military and to evaluate and guide programs and policy. Additional information on the DLAP is available at <http://dlap.rti.org>.

## DoD HRB Surveys

Since 1982 RTI has conducted nine surveys related to health behaviors for the active duty force under the guidance of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Health Affairs) and the TRICARE Management Activity (HPA&E). All of the surveys have assessed the prevalence of alcohol use, illicit drug use, and tobacco use, as well as negative consequences associated with substance use. The 1985 through 1992 surveys also covered an expanded set of health behaviors and related issues. In 1995 and 1998, items were added to assess selected *Healthy People 2000* objectives and to examine concerns of military women, mental health, oral health, and gambling behaviors. The 2002, 2005, and 2008 surveys included *Healthy People*



2010 objectives; augmented the items on alcohol, tobacco, nutrition, and mental health; and added new items on supplement use, risk taking and impulsive behavior, job satisfaction, and religiosity.

Findings from these data are used to better understand the nature, causes, and consequences of substance use, to assess health practices in the military, and to help evaluate and guide programs and policy. The 2008 final report examines new areas of health behaviors in response to DoD's evolving needs.

## RTI's Approach

For these studies, RTI conducted comprehensive surveys of active duty military personnel selected to represent men and women in all pay grades of the active duty force. The respective surveys have included worldwide samples ranging from 21,936 in 1982 to 28,546 in 2008, with participants drawn from 60 installations worldwide representing Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and (beginning in 2008) Coast Guard personnel. Self-administered questionnaires were completed anonymously, primarily in group sessions at military installations; others were obtained by mail for those not attending the on-base sessions.





## Key Findings

Selected findings from the 2008 HRB Survey, the most recent survey with published results, revealed the following:

- There has been notable progress since 1980 in reducing cigarette and illicit drug use, but little progress in reducing heavy alcohol use.
- Cigarette smoking in the past month decreased significantly from 51% in 1980 to 31% in 2008.
- Illicit drug use in the past month declined from 28% in 1980 to 3% in 2002. In 2005, the rate was 5% and in 2008 it was 12%. Improved question wording may partially account for these higher observed rates, which are largely attributable to reported increases in misuse of prescription pain medications.
- Heavy alcohol use in the past month increased from 15% in 1998 to 20% in 2008, about the same level as in 1980 (21%) when the survey series began.
- Compared with rates for civilians, illicit drug use in the military is lower, heavy alcohol use is higher, and cigarette use is about the same. There are some variations within different age groups.

- About 27% of military personnel were likely to describe their military duties as stressful, a reduction from 32% in 2005. The most frequently indicated stressors for both men and women were separation from family, deployment, and increases in workload.
- There was little difference from 2005 to 2008 in rates of personnel meeting screening criteria for depression, generalized anxiety disorder, or suicidal ideation. However, there were significant increases in those meeting criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (7% vs. 11%) and self-reports of attempted suicide (0.8% vs. 2.2%).
- Combat deployment to any operational theater was associated with higher rates of cigarette use, heavy alcohol use, and the need for further PTSD evaluation.

## References

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## More Information

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