

**Trends in Risk Factors in the United States:
1971-1975 v. 1999-2002**

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Policy Abstract

In the past few decades, some measures of population risk have improved, while others have deteriorated. Understanding trends in overall population health requires integrating these different components of health. In this study, we compare the risk factor profile of the population in the early 1970s with that of the population in the early 2000s, using data from National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (NHANES). We estimate the impact of demographics, smoking, drinking, obesity, blood pressure, and cholesterol on 10-year mortality rates; and we compare the predicted 10-year mortality in the two time periods. For the population aged 20-74, the 10-year probability of death fell from 9.8 percent in 1971-75 to 8.4 percent in 1999-2002. For the population aged 55-74, the 10-year risk of death falls from 25.7 percent to 21.7 percent. The largest contributors to these changes are reductions in smoking and better control of blood pressure. Increased obesity increased mortality risk, but not by as large a quantitative amount. Despite substantial increases in obesity in the past three decades, the overall population risk profile is healthier now than it was formerly. Both behavioral changes and medical care have reduced risk.