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# Healthy behaviors and lifestyles in young adults with a history of developmental disabilities

Jacqueline Rurangirwa<sup>a,b</sup>, Kim Van Naarden Braun<sup>b,c</sup>,  
Diana Schendel<sup>b</sup>, Marshalyn Yeargin-Allsopp<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Association of Schools of Public Health Fellow, USA

<sup>b</sup> Developmental Disabilities Team, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Road MS E-86, Atlanta, GA 30333, USA

<sup>c</sup> Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education, United States Department of Energy, USA

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Measure select Healthy People 2010 Leading Health Indicators in young adults with and without a history of developmental disabilities (DD) using a population-based cohort.

**Methods:** Young adults were interviewed to assess the prevalence of seven Leading Health Indicators: physical activity, overweight and obesity, tobacco use, substance abuse, responsible sexual behavior, injury and violence, and access to healthcare.

**Results:** Young adults with a history of DD were less likely to be involved in tobacco use, substance abuse and sexual activity. Areas of concern included below normal Body Mass Index, lack of HIV/AIDS and sex education, preventive healthcare services for women, and victimization.

**Conclusions:** Despite some healthy lifestyle indicators, health gaps may place young adults with a history of DD at risk for poor health and quality of life.

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**Keywords:** Developmental disabilities; Epilepsy; Body mass index; Leading Health Indicators

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## 1. Introduction

The benefits of preventing chronic diseases through a healthy lifestyle have been well documented in the general population (Kopelman, 2000; Leslie, Fotheringham, Owen, &

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 404 498 3842; fax: +1 404 498 3550.

E-mail addresses: [jrurangirwa@yahoo.com](mailto:jrurangirwa@yahoo.com) (J. Rurangirwa), [mxy1@cdc.gov](mailto:mxy1@cdc.gov) (M. Yeargin-Allsopp).

Bauman, 2001; Lowry et al., 2000; Mokdad et al., 1999, 2000; Pate et al., 1995; Resnick et al., 1997; Sutherland, Couch, & Iacono, 2002). For people with disabilities, promoting healthy lifestyle behaviors such as physical activity also facilitates efforts to prevent secondary conditions (e.g. muscle atrophy and obesity) (Lancioni & O'Reilly, 1998; Rimmer & Braddock, 2002; Rimmer, Braddock, & Pitetti, 1996; Sutherland et al., 2002). This view is reinforced by the inclusion of the goal to “promote health of people with disabilities, prevent secondary conditions, and eliminate disparities between people with and without disabilities in the U.S. population” as one of the main objectives of the *Healthy People 2010* (HP2010, 2000, II, p. 6.3). In order to achieve this objective, HP2010 recommends the use of 10 Leading Health Indicators as markers of health promoting behavior related to the current major public health concerns in the United States. The HP2010 Leading Health Indicators consist of physical activity, overweight and obesity, tobacco use, substance abuse, responsible sexual behavior, mental health, injury and violence, environmental quality, immunization and access to health care (*Healthy People 2010*, 2000, I p. 24).

Several studies have examined specific Leading Health Indicators such as substance abuse, tobacco use and/or responsible sexual behavior among individuals with and without a broad range of disabilities in age groups ranging from adolescence to adulthood (Blum, Kelly, & Ireland, 2001; Brawarsky, Brooks, Wilber, Gertz, & Klein, 2002; Gilson, Chilcoat, & Stapleton, 1996; Hogan, McLellan, & Bauman, 2000; Kokkonen, Saukkonen, Timonen, Serlo, & Kinnunen, 1991). However, none of these studies focused on young adults with developmental disabilities (defined as a diverse group of chronic physical, cognitive, psychological, sensory, or speech impairments that are manifested before 18 years of age (Yeargin-Allsopp, Murphy, Oakley, & Sikes, 1992)). Young adulthood (we defined as ages 21–25 years) is a vulnerable transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood, during which unhealthy behaviors developed during adolescence may be either changed through behavioral interventions or become ingrained as lifetime patterns (Emmons, Wechsler, Dowdall, & Abraham, 1998). These vulnerabilities may be exacerbated for young adults with developmental disabilities because as they transition out of childhood many of the resources, supervision, and support systems that may have protected them from risky behaviors or encouraged healthy lifestyles as children or adolescents are no longer available. To date there have been no population-based studies that have examined healthy behavior and lifestyle outcomes among young adults with developmental disabilities. The purpose of this study was to compare the prevalence of healthy behaviors and lifestyles using select HP2010 Leading Health Indicators in young adults with and without a history of developmental disabilities using a population-based cohort in Metropolitan Atlanta.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Study population*

We used two data sources to establish our cohort: the Metropolitan Atlanta Developmental Disabilities Study (MADDS) and the MADDS Follow-Up of Young Adults (MADDS-FU). The MADDS was a population-based study of 10-year-old children with developmental disabilities whose parents or legal guardians resided in one of five

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