

A new study out of the University of Wisconsin that ranks Idaho's counties according to a variety of factors that determine health shows that counties in the Panhandle with the most people rank as healthier places overall to live.

Kootenai and Bonner counties rank in the top third of all Idaho's counties in about half of the eight major categories compared. Neither county ranks in the bottom third in any category. Boundary, Benewah and Shoshone counties rank in the bottom third of all counties in Idaho in at least half the categories.

Forty-two of 44 Idaho counties were included in the study. Not enough information was available from Camas and Clark counties.

Strengths and weaknesses vary by county, ranging from health behaviors that include tobacco use and unsafe sex to a high number of babies born with low weights and residents who lack health insurance or access to health care.

"The information is no surprise. It comes from reports that health districts submit and others we study to plan programs to improve health in our counties," said Jeanne Bock, director of the Panhandle Health District. "But the way it's presented shows that improving overall health takes more than health districts. It requires government, education, law enforcement—a whole community effort. Hopefully this assessment will start the ball rolling toward improvements for everyone."

The report, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is the first to rank health environments for nearly every county in the nation. It compares counties within their states, but does not compare them to counties in other states. The online report is available at [www.countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org).

The county health assessments were undertaken to motivate communities to work together toward improvements. The Wisconsin Population Health Institute has conducted a similar survey in Wisconsin since 2003.

The Idaho rankings are germane only to Idaho. A bottom ranking doesn't mean a county is unhealthy. It means that overall healthy living, as defined by this report, is harder to achieve in some counties than others. Rankings may be due to such unchanging factors as a small population or geographic isolation.

The areas compared include the following factors: death before age 75; low-weight births; number of sick days; how many people describe their physical and/or mental health as fair or poor; tobacco use; diet and exercise; alcohol use; unsafe sex; access to health care; quality of care; education; employment; income; family and social support; community safety; air quality; access to health food and liquor stores.

A chart of the rankings for northern Idaho is below, but here are a few interesting findings:

- Bonner County ranked the highest of the five northern counties for health behaviors, showing promising results for programs that fight tobacco use, alcohol abuse and unsafe sexual practices and promote diet and regular exercise.
- Boundary and Kootenai counties ranked very high for their access to and quality of health care. Both counties have a high number of primary care doctors serving the population and a low number of preventable hospital stays.
- Benewah County finished in the top third of counties for how long its residents live, yet it ranked last in the state for how healthy and happy those

people say they are, for the high unemployment rate and for the very low high school graduation rate.

- Shoshone County was ranked in the top third of counties for its low number of uninsured residents and fairly high number of primary care doctors, which is good because it ranked near the bottom for how long its residents live, how happy and healthy they believe they are and how much they smoke, drink alcohol and exercise.

The report provides counties with a starting point from which to measure improvements. It will provide comparable data for three more years. The study also identifies who's successful in certain areas so other counties can learn from them.

“We’re less concerned with how we compare to other parts of the state than with what we can learn from each other to make our counties healthier,” Bock said.

### County Health Rankings

Category	Benewah	Bonner	Boundary	Kootenai	Shos
<b>Mortality</b> – premature death before age 75	12th	25th	41st	11th	34th
<b>Morbidity</b> – self-reported health; sick days; % of low birth weights	35th	11th	4th	13th	40th
Tobacco use; diet and exercise; alcohol use; unsafe sex	35th	13th	25th	18th	40th
<b>Clinical Care</b> – access to care; quality of care	26th	13th	5th	3rd	12th
Education; employment; income; family and social support; community safety	42nd	28th	39th	17th	40th
<b>Physical Environment</b> – air quality; access to healthy foods; liquor stores	28th	29th	37th	18th	30th
<b>Overall Health Outcomes</b> – mortality and morbidity	23rd	16th	34th	9th	40th