

Risky teen behavior may not occur at home or school: but how to track?

How can researchers track where teens go when not in or near home or school to see if this movement has an impact on health-related behavior such as smoking or sexual activity? The answer is through that ubiquitous teen accessory – the cell phone.

In a paper published in the April issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health* researchers from Indiana University School of Medicine report on a pilot study which evaluated the feasibility of using global position system -enabled cell phones to track where 14- to 16-year-old girls spent their time.

“We didn’t know if the technology would work, if the kids would take the cell phones with them or would leave them at home. But they did carry the phones and the GPS data revealed that they were spending more time away from home, school and surrounding areas than anticipated. Learning that we were able to track their movement is important because previous studies which have looked at the effect of environment on teens have focused only on home, school and surrounding areas,” said Sarah Wiehe, M.D., M.P.H., an assistant professor of pediatrics at the IU School of Medicine and a Regenstrief Institute affiliated scientist.

“A person’s environment in some way influences or is at least associated with their health and health outcomes and in the case of adolescents their health behaviors. But we don’t have a great idea of why that association exists. What in the environment is contributing to behavior choices such as drug use” When tracked with GPS we know where the teens are and when they are there but we don’t know what they are doing. Now that we know that the technology works, that the girls took their phones with them, we need to learn the characteristics of the environments in which they find themselves,” she added.

This pilot study of the feasibility of GPS tracking to discern teen travel patterns was supported by the IU School of Medicine’s General Clinical Research Center’s Health Outcomes and Research Feasibility Fund. Based on the success of the initial project, the researchers have received funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to enroll 160 urban teenage girls in a study to track their movements in spring, summer, fall and winter (to account for seasonal variations). They hope to learn much more about how teenage girls interact with their many environments in ways that impact health.

“We are at the tip of the iceberg seeing where and how teens spend time. As a doctor charged with keeping kids healthy, I am hoping our studies will result in interventions, perhaps something as simple as text messages encouraging healthy behavior or something we haven’t even thought of yet, that will encourage good choices,” said Dr. Wiehe, who is a pediatrician with the Wishard Health System.

Source: Indiana University

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