

Obesity epidemic affects the whole community

**“Moving Grays Harbor”
By Maryann Welch**

Why is obesity a public health concern – it only affects one person, not the community?

Why isn't being overweight considered just an individual's choice or problem?

These are good questions that have been posed to me several times lately as a result of this weekly column.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: Obesity has become epidemic – and has all the accompanying indicators of an epidemic. So, yes individuals do make their own choices about eating and activity, but, just as in other areas of our lives, our decisions or choices can have broader effects.

In addition to being detrimental to individual health, the results of this epidemic are putting a financial, social and personal strain on the citizens of this state in many ways.

In general, overweight and inactive people aren't as healthy. As a group they take more sick days, use more medical services and cost the entire healthcare industry more money. We all face increased health insurance premiums to cover the higher rate of diseases like diabetes.

In public health we look at the health of our community as a whole, not just one person at a time. This includes assessing why people get sick or disabled and die in our county. More and more statistics show that the overall root causes of disease and death are related to obesity and inactivity. Smoking-related disease is still up on top, but obesity is catching up.

In working to improve the health of Grays Harbor, we can't ignore the effects of obesity, inactivity and smoking.

So, that's the job of public health. It's just like the Economic Development Council and the Chamber of Commerce working to improve the economic health of our community. They realize that the health of each business can help or hurt our overall economic health.

We're working to find ways to turn our physical health numbers around for the better. Healthcare providers do this one person at a time. In public health, we look for strategies that can reach many of you at once.

More than half of all Washington State residents are overweight and in the last 10 years obesity rates have doubled. This shows an alarming trend.

Childhood obesity is also on the rise, which means this epidemic is “spreading” to the next generation.

The state's population of those 65 years and older is increasingly heavier than in many other states.

Rates of chronic disease and disabling conditions associated with poor diet and lack of exercise for people of all ages escalate year after year.

Rocketing medical costs of obesity-related diseases are crippling Washington State's ability to provide affordable health care coverage.

In our state, the estimated cost of physical inactivity in 2002 was more than \$5 billion.

The news has been full of practical results of what happens when a nation becomes super-sized.

For example, recently the U.S. Coast Guard called on operators of small passenger vessels to change the number of people allowed on each boat. It seems that in 1942 we could safely assume the average weight of a person at 140 to 160 pounds. Nowadays the average passenger weighs 185. This means fewer passengers will pay higher fares to make up the cost.

Here we are one of the most advanced, richest nations in the world. We have great medical care and lots of information on how to eat well and exercise. Yet, overall our choices in food and inactivity are causing an epidemic that not only hurts us but also casts a shadow on our children's and grandchildren's futures.

The good news is that we do have a lot of choices. Make daily choices to eat more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains and fewer sugar-laden foods. Take a walk, move your body, turn off the TV.

All these simple things can make a big difference in your health, attitude, life and legacy, and ultimately, the health of our entire community.

This week's challenge

Are you overweight? Get on the scale. Do you know what you should weigh for your height? Don't get discouraged if there's a big discrepancy between the numbers. Instead, just decide to move. Take a walk today. Make a modest plan for changing your behavior. You can do it and we can help.

Mark Your Calendar

- **May 20, 21 – the Home and Garden Show** is at the Grays Harbor County Fairgrounds starting at 10 a.m. Come walk around the grounds and get ideas for gardening fun and listen to seminars by renowned gardeners. The event is free.
- **Any day – Vance Creek Park** is nearby, just south of the freeway at Elma. Enjoy a walk around the ponds. Each pond is approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ mile around. The east pond is paved and level, suitable for strollers, wheelchairs or bikes. It also has many strategically placed benches for resting. The west pond offers a more natural path. This is a perennial favorite place for kids. What more could you want – water,

ducks, play structures and open space to run!

Maryann Welch is the director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.