

Childhood obesity a growing concern

Moving Grays Harbor By Maryann Welch

Public health experts say that today's children are the first in generations whose life expectancy is shorter than their parents.

In talking with Mark Hanke, the CEO of the Grays Harbor YMCA, he reminded me of this; and like him, I'm very concerned.

Childhood obesity and its related health problems are some of the biggest reasons for this lower life expectancy. Healthy behaviors modeled by adults can make the biggest impact in combating this trend.

This week I talked with Mark and Claudia Peterson, director of nutrition service and diabetes education at Grays Harbor Community Hospital.

I wanted to get a view of childhood obesity from two different angles – activity and nutrition. And, I wanted some ideas for encouraging healthy lifestyles for this generation of children.

In the last 26 years working at YMCAs, Mark says that children are “absolutely more obese and less active.”

“There used to be a lot more open play, kids riding their bikes to the Y and dropping in to play basketball. Things have changed.”

“Our biggest challenge at the Y is simply to get kids to come,” he said.

For her part, Claudia is seeing more obese children and more children and young adults diagnosed with diabetes than she saw 21 years ago when she started.

“We live in an ‘obesegenic’ world,” she said. “The portions are larger, activity less and food available on every corner.”

Claudia and the other dieticians at Grays Harbor Hospital work with patients to identify key behaviors to change. They help them become more active, limit portion sizes and decrease calorie intake.

“But it's way more complicated than that. It's important to have the family dynamics work toward healthier food intake and become more active too,” she told me.

Mark agrees and says the whole family has to make fitness a goal.

“If the kids are taught good healthy habits, but come home and the parents aren't doing the same, it makes it difficult.”

While both Mark and Claudia agree that childhood obesity and inactivity are quite complex problems they each pointed out a couple simple things that can make a difference – eating dinner together as a family and just playing or moving together.

Both of those things were constants in my growing up years and in raising my own children. With so many changes in our world from increased television viewing, and the advent of computer time and video games to the availability of fast food to the hurried lifestyles so many of us live, some of the basics of family life have all but disappeared.

But, families sitting around the dinner table as often as possible and also sharing in physical recreation together – a walk, a bike ride, a swim, a game of badminton – are two things worth holding onto.

“It's been shown in many studies,” Claudia said, “that sharing a daily meal results in people eating more fruits and vegetables, taking in more calcium and having a better nutrition intake in general.”

Another key to combating obesity is taking a look at what beverages are being consumed. Pop, juices, energy drinks and specialty coffees are loaded with sugar and calories, she said.

She and Mark agree that limiting “screen” time – TV, video games, computer – makes a big difference alone.

Mark says the YMCA is continuing to work toward encouraging active, healthy people.

Nationally the Y has started something called “Activate America.” Through national studies it has found that “we have lots of ‘health seekers,’ but for whatever reason, people just don’t do it,” he said.

So the Y is concentrating on helping people one person at a time, trying to connect them with a coach, a friend and the resources they need to succeed.

Recently with the help of a grant, the Y installed the Bishop Busy Town, a wonderful play area for children up to second grade.

Another grant has helped them purchase buses. This summer they’ve teamed up with both the Aberdeen and the Hoquiam parks departments to have kids meet at a designated park for pickup to come spend the day at the Y.

Seeing little glimmers of hope

Claudia says she sees a glimmer of hope. She’s just returned from a conference where a study was announced that childhood obesity didn’t increase this last year. (“It was a tiny decline, nothing significant but at least it didn’t go up!”)

While there are lots of barriers to living a healthy life, Mark said the YMCA doesn’t want income to be one of them.

Thanks to the Bishop Endowment Fund people who need help get it, he said. If you’re one of those people who would like a Y membership, but can’t afford it, call the Y and see what can be done.

And, while he’d love to see us all at the Y, Mark said you don’t have to be a member to get fit.

“Walk, bike, play ball, use the TV to do a fitness video. And, try not to make

excuses and just make it happen,” he said.

“This obesity thing is so huge and we can’t afford to ignore it,” Claudia said. We may not know all the answers to cure obesity, but we have to start.”

As adults we can make a difference by getting active and eating healthy ourselves!

What’s your fitness story?

YMCA to give away membership

Have these columns helped inspire you to get active? If so, we want to hear about it. Share your story with us and we’ll enter your name into a drawing for a 1-year membership to the YMCA of Grays Harbor. (Thank you YMCA!)

Please e-mail your story to moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or call Wilma Weber @ 532-8631 x 483.

Thanks for reading! Drawing will be June 30.

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.