

Let's make "Pro-health" our motto

Moving Grays Harbor
By Maryann Welch

Harborites smoke too much, eat too much, and don't get enough physical activity. The list can go on and on. If you look at numbers from around the state on all public health issues, Grays Harbor is consistently near the top (if not number 1) in all categories of harmful health behaviors. We are killing ourselves, and we don't seem to be able to make significant progress toward healthier behaviors. I've come to the conclusion that focusing on the negative numbers isn't going to change anything. How about changing the effort to getting all of us to choose to be pro-health.

I was glad to see the recent Daily World editorial (Kick the habit & keep walkin') that connected the high smoking rates on the Harbor to the high rates of cancer that we also experience. A letter to Editor followed with the point of view that we have more important things to worry about without singling out one group of people. Cause and effect is sometimes a hard reality to accept and acknowledge. Meanwhile, another cause and effect killer is on the loose. "Obesity" (a symptom of the primary problems of inactivity and improper nutrition) is quickly becoming the number one cause of preventable death in the United States. This condition kills by increasing your chances of suffering heart disease, strokes and diabetes, yet many people are not willing to accept that they can help defeat this monster by making pro-health choices every day.

Study after study shows that making gradual changes in nutrition and physical activity can add up to some rather significant results. And I am not

just talking about weight-loss. It has also been established that even if you don't lose any weight when you become more physically active, you are still impacting your body positively – your heart, lungs, muscles, joints, mood – all benefit from movement as your body composition changes toward an increase in lean tissue.

Granted, change is hard. It is easier just to maintain the status quo and "settle in". And until "settling in" starts to interfere with our livelihood, many of us find it easy to put off all the health recommendations until "tomorrow". What if you had to start ponying up \$100 a month to pay for medications to keep your diabetes and high blood pressure in check? What if your insurance rates also went up because of it? Would you be able to afford the extra out-of-pocket expenses that lifestyle-induced diseases lead to? Wouldn't it be easier to opt out of that future and make gradual changes now that would help to prevent such expenses? We, as a society, would be much better served if we practiced prevention instead of waiting for the intervention of medical science.

We need to reinforce this with our children as well. The other day I was in the grocery store and overheard a conversation in the beverage aisle. One customer had just loaded his cart with multiple cases of soda (got to get it while it's on sale) and enough bags of chips to feed an army. He was explaining to his friend that he had a house full of teenage boys for three weeks and boy can they eat! He went on to say this was the third time this week he had been to the store for snacks. Yikes. No wonder the obesity rates continue to skyrocket. I just hope those kids were not sitting around all day to boot.

As adults we know better and we should hold ourselves accountable for setting better examples. Consistently feeding kids junk might make us a little

more popular for the moment, but we all know that doing so puts their health at risk. They are being programmed to think that eating unlimited amounts of junk food is an acceptable activity; where in reality, junk food should only be acceptable in limited quantities and **AS PART OF A HEALTHY DIET.**

I often wonder what it would take to get this county in tune to eating healthier and engaging in more physical activity. I know there are an enormous amount of real and perceived barriers, but would it be possible to unite schools, day cares, grocery stores, restaurants, vending companies, families and children in a common goal of improving the health of this fine county? By choosing to offer healthy choices, making them more affordable and encouraging physical activity every day we could move in the right direction. Don't get me wrong, I'm not advocating for the total elimination of junk food and adoption of a boot-camp style physical activity requirement for all students. I'm merely promoting moving toward a diet that would include more fruits, vegetables and whole grains as opposed to the empty calories that are supplied by processed foods and making time in each day to allow kids and adults (of all ages) to be physically active. Sounds idyllic, doesn't it.

Some of you might be thinking of little changes you can start to make and I'd like to throw out this challenge: be more proactive with what you and yours eat whether at home, work, or school. Think about what you can do to provide a nutritious meal. Ask yourself some tough questions: Do you really need a dessert, coffee drink, energy drink or soda every day? What about physical activity? Can you set aside just 10 minutes every day this week to improve your fitness? Go for a walk on a break, pull some weeds, shoot hoops with the kids, just find something that makes you move and enjoy it.

We are all faced with choices every day – especially as related to what we eat and what we do. Make the choice to be pro-health and you will undoubtedly reap the rewards. Who knows, we might even see some positive movement in our county's health statistics at some point!

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.