

COMMISSIONER'S COLUMN

Overweight and Obesity Prevention Initiatives

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Overweight and obesity are considered epidemic in the United States today. The 2003-04 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) estimates that 66% of adults 20 years and older are overweight (34%) or obese (32%). This increase in overweight and obesity has occurred among men and women of all ages and all racial and ethnic groups. The same upward trend has also been noted in children. NHANES data for children ages 2-19 indicate that an estimated 17% are overweight. Prevalence of overweight among children ages 6-11 increased from 11% (1988-94) to 19% (2003-04). During the same time period, the prevalence of overweight increased from 11% to 17% among adolescents aged 12-19. The health implications of this epidemic are profound. Obesity is associated with higher rates of type 2 diabetes, stroke, hypertension, dyslipidemia, certain types of cancer, asthma, osteoarthritis and poor self-esteem. The Surgeon General has stated that health problems resulting from overweight and obesity could reverse many of the health gains achieved in recent decades.

Overweight and obesity are chronic conditions that result from energy imbalance over time. The cause of energy imbalance varies but is usually the result of excess consumption of calories and/or lack of calories expended (reduced physical activity). Individual behaviors ultimately dictate a person's energy balance and resultant health outcomes. The good news is that behaviors, frequently influenced by a person's environment, can be changed through prevention and treatment.

The Westchester County Department of Health (WCDH), in an effort to stem the tide on obesity, offers programs that focus on individual health behaviors along with programs that promote environmental and policy change at the school and community level. Some of these programs are highlighted below.

The WIC Program

Since 1979, WCDH has provided WIC services to low-income pregnant women, new mothers, infants and children up to the age of five. The WIC Program, officially known as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, is a federally funded nutrition intervention program. Program staff provide health and nutrition assessments, education and counseling, monthly checks to purchase nutritious foods, and referrals for health care and other services to over 8,400 clients each year in Yonkers, White Plains, and Port Chester. Last year, WCDH implemented a *Fit WIC* pilot project that encouraged children ages 3-5 to be active for a minimum of 60 minutes each day. The WIC program is committed to educating families on the importance of developing healthy eating and physical activity behaviors at an early age as a first step in obesity prevention.

The Fit Kids Program

Schools are in a position to promote healthy eating and physical activity habits among students that can continue into their adult lives. The Westchester County *Fit Kids* Program was developed to assist schools in this task. *Fit Kids* partners with schools to improve the quality of food offered in school cafeterias and vending machines; to create opportunities for regular physical activity among students before, during and after school; and to encourage the development of policies and environments that support good nutrition and physical activity.

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In January 2005, WCDH was awarded a grant from New York State to support programs to reduce obesity, physical inactivity and other preventable causes of cardiovascular disease. As one of only nine organizations statewide to receive funding, the Health Department has been able to expand the Fit Kids program to Orange, Dutchess and Putnam Counties. Westchester serves as the lead agency of the Fit Kids of Hudson Valley Coalition (FKHVC). During the five-year grant cycle (2005 to 2010), the FKHVC will work with 110 schools. To date, 51 schools in the four counties have signed up for the *Fit Kids* program. Since its inception in March 2003, nearly 61,000 children in 105 schools have participated in *Fit Kids* activities.

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 established a new requirement that all school districts with a federally-funded school meals program develop and implement wellness policies addressing nutrition and physical activity by the start of the 2006-07 school year. Local school wellness policies are an important tool to promote healthy eating and physical activity through changes in school programs and environments. The policies are to address nutrition education goals; physical activity goals; nutrition guidelines for all foods available on school campuses; ways for parents, students, administrators, the school board and food service representatives to assist in policy development; and plans for evaluating policies. In preparation for the new law, WCDH started working with schools during 2005-06 to provide technical assistance in evaluating their current wellness programs and developing wellness policies.

Another new project for WCDH is a Body Mass Index (BMI) Survey initiative. At present, the prevalence of childhood obesity in Westchester County is not known. It is important to have these statistics available to more effectively address the problem. Schools were approached to determine their willingness to partner with WCDH to assess the prevalence of obesity among their students. Participating schools will provide existing height, weight, age and gender data for students, to be reported anonymously. The Health Department will then calculate BMIs to determine the scope of childhood obesity for the district.

BeFit Westchester

The Be Fit Westchester campaign is a joint effort between the Departments of Health; Parks, Recreation, and Conservation; and the Westchester County Executive's Communications Office. The campaign, launched in October 2004, encourages people to make healthier food choices and increase their daily physical activity. One way for county residents to become more active is to join *BeFit at the Westchester*, a free walking club that meets on Tuesday and Friday mornings at The Westchester mall. More information about the walking club, as well as general information on healthy eating and physical activity, can be found on the program's website (www.westchestergov.com/fitness).

Realizing that one of the first steps to healthy living is assessing health risk, WCDH promotes *Take Care of Yourself... Know Your Numbers*, an educational brochure that provides information on several important numbers (ie; total cholesterol, HDL, LDL, triglycerides, blood glucose, blood pressure, and body mass index). The brochure encourages people to speak with their health care providers about these numbers and to take simple, actionable steps to reduce their risk of obesity and chronic disease. To download a copy of this brochure, please visit the Department's website (www.westchestergov.com/health).

Individual behavioral change is key to reducing the incidence of overweight and obesity in Westchester. Educators, parents, and health care professionals can support environmental changes that promote healthy lifestyles and provide education to encourage the awareness and motivation needed to help individuals make these changes. ♦