

Commissioner's Column

"BE FIT WESTCHESTER" FOCUSES ON OBESITY PREVENTION

Joshua Lipsman, M.D., M.P.H, Commissioner of Health
Carrie Aaron-Young, RD, MPA, Bureau of Nutrition Services
Toby Miller, RD, MA, MBA, Bureau of Nutrition Services

The problem of overweight and obesity in the United States, and its association with chronic disease, has become an increasing concern over recent years. This article provides an update on the growing problem, and highlights Westchester County's new initiative, BeFit Westchester, which was designed to combat the obesity epidemic by creating awareness, providing education, and offering opportunities for physical activity to all county residents.

Update on the Obesity Epidemic

Overweight and obesity continue to increase in the United States. 2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data estimate that 65% of adults 20 years and older are either overweight (34%) or obese (31%). 2003 New York State Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data indicate that slightly over half of Westchester County adults are overweight (38.2%) or obese (15.4%). Furthermore, the epidemic is not limited to the adult population. According to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data, the prevalence of overweight among children and adolescents is rapidly rising with 16% of children ages 6 to 19 overweight.

Physical inactivity and unhealthy eating contribute to obesity, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes and combined, account for about 365,000 preventable deaths each year in the United States. The CDC estimates that more than 50% of American adults are not active on a regular basis and 26% of adults are not active at all. In order to tackle the problems of overweight and obesity, it is essential that health care providers routinely counsel patients on the benefits of healthy eating and regular physical activity. Simple health messages that health care providers can share with patients include:

- Follow a well-balanced meal plan and focus on portion control to facilitate positive lifestyle changes that will enable weight maintenance, not merely weight loss.
- Begin exercise incrementally. There is no need for special equipment or dedicated gym time. Incorporate opportunities for physical activity into your everyday routine by taking the stairs rather than the elevator and walking whenever possible.
- Consult a Registered Dietitian for assistance with setting weight loss goals and developing a nutritionally sound meal plan.

Westchester County Department of Health programs work with children and their families to promote healthy eating and physical activity. Eat Well Play Hard, a New York State Department of Health funded program, works with low-income families in Yonkers to develop healthy nutrition and physical activity behaviors early in life. The Fit Kids Program strives to create healthy school environments, thereby reducing the incidence of overweight among Westchester school children. In January 2005, the Westchester County Health Department was one of nine agencies to receive funding from the State Health Department to support healthy lifestyle promotion. This new funding will be used to expand the Fit Kids program in the Hudson Valley region.

(Continued on next page)

Commissioner's Corner (*Continued from previous page*)**BeFit Westchester**

In order to reach the broadest spectrum of Westchester County residents, prevention strategies must be implemented at the community level. In October 2004, Westchester County launched BeFit Westchester, a countywide campaign to encourage people to make healthier food choices and to increase their daily physical activity. The program is a joint effort of the Westchester County Departments of Health; Parks, Recreation and Conservation; and Senior Programs and Services.

The program's approach is two-fold: first, to create awareness among county residents that routine physical activity and a healthy diet will lead to positive health outcomes; and second, to create opportunities for residents to be physically active.

A variety of methods are currently being utilized:

- **BeFit Westchester website**

The newly launched website (www.westchestergov.com/fitness) serves as a source of nutrition and fitness education information. It also provides a link to America on the Move™, an online program designed to motivate county residents to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives. Residents can log onto America on the Move™ at www.americaonthemove.org and join the program as part of the BeFit Westchester program. Individuals can then track the number of steps taken daily and the time spent participating in other types of exercise.

- **Be Fit at the Westchester**

A new walking club began at The Westchester Mall in February 2005. Led by health and fitness professionals, the club meets Tuesday and Friday mornings from 8 am to 10 am. Using pedometers, participants can log in their mileage and be eligible for prizes as they achieve walking milestones. Periodic talks on health, nutrition and fitness are provided. Be Fit at The Westchester is just one example of a community intervention that can help residents reach achievable goals for weight control and fitness.

- **County events**

Westchester County's extensive network of parks, paved pathways and hiking trails provide many opportunities to be physically active. The Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation's activity calendar is prominently featured on the BeFit Westchester website so residents can be informed of planned events in parks throughout the county.

In addition, the BeFit Westchester program hosts seasonal events throughout the year to promote fitness and good nutrition. These events serve as a venue to deliver public health messages that address obesity prevention strategies as well as to provide opportunities for people to take actionable steps toward improving their health.

The BeFit Westchester program is appropriate for individuals of all ages, physical abilities, and fitness/activity levels. There is no cost to program participants, thus providing all county residents with the opportunity to participate. It is only through efforts reaching people of all ages with consistent public health messages and offering chances to practice healthy behaviors that the rapid rise in obesity can be reversed.

For more information on any of these programs visit www.westchestergov.com/health or call the Health Department at (914) 813-5000.