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Campaign's on to get Pittsburgh moving

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By Jack Kelly, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Dr. John Jakicic has an absurdly ambitious goal, which can be achieved if most of us set - and keep -- modest goals.

Dr. Jakicic, 42, is head of the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Health and Physical Activity. He wants to make Pittsburgh the healthiest city in America.

That's a tall order. Late last month, the Trust for America's Health, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., issued a report that indicated Americans are fatter than ever, and Pennsylvanians are among the fattest of Americans.

"Pittsburgh is one of the most unhealthy cities in the country," Dr. Jakicic said. "But it doesn't have to stay that way."

Approximately 119 million adult Americans (64.5 percent) are either overweight or obese, said the Trust for America's Health. The estimated number of obese American adults rose from 23.7 percent in 2003 to 24.5 percent in 2004.

Morbid obesity is defined as being about 100 pounds overweight, or having a body mass index (BMI) around 40 or above.

The fattest state in the nation is Mississippi, where 29.5 percent of the population is considered obese. The leanest is Colorado, where only 16.9 percent of adults are considered obese.

Pennsylvania ranks 15th among the 50 states, with 24 percent of adults considered obese.

Dr. Jakicic, who has been working on obesity since 1988, got a firsthand view of the problem Thursday night from his seat high in the bleachers at the Steelers' final preseason game.



Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette

Dr. John Jakicic is head of a program sponsored chiefly by UPMC to make Pittsburgh "the healthiest city in the country."

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"I was sitting in Section X in the upper deck," he said. "There were people walking to their seats, and they would have to stop and sit on the steps to rest. It was ironic. They were coming to watch these marvelous athletes, and they couldn't even climb the steps."

Dr. Jakicic runs for 45 minutes to an hour each day, but you and I don't need to do nearly as much exercise to arrest -- and maybe reverse -- the growth of obesity, he said.

If each of us would just walk an additional 2,000 steps (about a mile) each day, and consume the equivalent of a single cookie less in calories each day, the trend toward obesity could be stopped, and perhaps reversed, he said.

"Small steps can lead to big changes," he said.

Dr. Jakicic is head of Pittsburgh On the Move, a communitywide initiative for better health. Pittsburgh is one of 20 communities in America on the Move, an initiative that began in Colorado in 2001.

Dr. Jakicic has recruited some, er, heavyweight cosponsors for Pittsburgh on the Move, including the UPMC Health Plan; Heinz and Del Monte foods, and the Giant Eagle chain of grocery stores.

The Web site for Pittsburgh On the Move got up and running Aug. 28. The group will hold its first major event on Sept. 13.

The Web site will offer weekly tips for better health. To access it, go to americaonthemove.org, and choose "Pittsburgh" from the list of communities on the left-hand side of page.

The site will encourage you to register, which you can do by clicking on the "get involved today" prompt.

Registration is important, because it will help Dr. Jakicic and his team track the improvement of the community.

"We're going to have some measurable outcomes," he said. "Our partnership with UPMC makes it possible to see how what we are doing is impacting health care costs."

Pittsburgh On the Move emphasizes walking, because it is an exercise anyone can do just about anywhere, Dr. Jakicic said.

The first event to be sponsored by the group will be a walk at noon Sept. 13 from the courthouse to Market Square, hosted by County Chief Executive Dan Onorato.

As the year goes on, Pittsburgh On the Move will place more emphasis on eating right, Dr. Jakicic said. Partners Heinz, Del Monte and Giant Eagle will help educate Pittsburghers about what constitutes a healthy diet, he said.

The data collected by the Trust for America's Health indicates obesity is linked to poverty. The fattest states in the country were the poorest states in the country.

Dr. Jakicic eats lightly, mostly nibbling on rabbit food. He rarely eats red meat. But people only need to make modest changes in their eating habits to make improvements, he said.

"The message to people is you can have it all ... as long as you have it in moderation," he said.