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\$50,000 grant to help fight obesity in kids

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FORD CITY -- A few years ago, Dr. Kirin Baht began to notice something about the children who came to his pediatric office.

"I began to notice not only the high number of children that were overweight, but also the high number of complications (from being overweight)," he said.

Two years ago, Armstrong School District and ACMH Hospital formed a partnership to combat the problem. The district and hospital received a \$50,000 grant Thursday from University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Health Plan to continue their efforts.

The grant will be used to enlarge programs already in the district: from physical activities such as walking contests to nutrition information being provided for parents.

"We understand that this isn't an isolated pediatric problem," said Dr. Harold Altman, ACMH Hospital's medical director. Child obesity is often influenced by family factors, such as unhealthy eating habits and "too much screen time in front of televisions and computers," he said.

The partnership to fight child obesity started after a state mandate for schools to begin measuring the body mass index (BMI) of students. Altman said it was "a unique opportunity" for schools and health-care providers to do something about the problem.

"Examining the BMI rates for Armstrong County has been very illuminating," he said. The county is below national averages when children enter school in kindergarten, but by fifth grade, half are at risk to be overweight or are already overweight.

UPMC became involved after a discussion between Altman and Dr. Mike Culyba, vice president of medical affairs for UPMC, about the partnership between the school district and ACMH Hospital.

"It just sounded very intriguing to me," Culyba said.

"We are very, very pleased to be able to participate (in the partnership's efforts)," said Diane Holder, president of UPMC Health Plan. "It's in our hands to try to fix this now."

"We believe Armstrong County's community-based program is an innovative public health approach to not only successfully address the root causes of this problem but also

to establish a sense of community ownership and pride for the health of its children," she said.

The school is planning on implementing an in-school curriculum on wellness, and is in the process of setting up after school programs to involve parents, such as using some of the grant money to offer use of the YMCA in Kittanning to parents and students on Sundays at a nominal fee.

"The grant will help with all of this," Altman said. "We gave many people a chance to be part of this project, and UPMC really stepped up to the plate and put their money where their mouth was."