

High rates of obesity targeted in health programs

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By Grace Patuwo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Grace Patuwo/Post-Gazette

Mohammed, 24, at Pitt's Cathedral of Learning, says he has battled weight problems since childhood, but has recently decided to retake control of his body. "I know that if I continue on like this, I'll get heart disease and probably die early. I don't want that to happen to me."

More ammunition in the battle against obesity arrived Tuesday with the release of a national report containing new data on how many Americans are seriously overweight -- and the numbers continue to alarm health experts.

"Obesity has increased faster than anyone could have imagined it would," said Thomas Frieden, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in a press briefing about a new telephone survey of about 400,000 people. Nearly 27 percent of the surveyed adults said they were obese in 2009, up from about 25.5 percent in 2007.

The CDC has reported that childhood obesity rates have more than doubled for children between the ages of 2 and 5 and tripled for those between the ages of 6 and 11. Overall, approximately 9 million children over the age of 6 are considered obese.

While these national statistics are staggering, Pennsylvania's are even higher than those of many states. According to the CDC, the state's obesity rates are higher than those in 36 other states and Washington, D.C.

In 2007, Pittsburgh was one of eight cities hand-picked by the National Institutes of Health to participate in the national "We Can!" program to help communities maintain healthy weights.

Three years later, numbers of overweight children and adults are still alarmingly high, and those people remain at a high risk of developing type 2 diabetes and serious complications related to the disease.

"Diabetes all over Pennsylvania and all over the United States is an incredible epidemic," said Linda Siminerio, director of the University of Pittsburgh Diabetes Institute.

In Tuesday's CDC report, Pennsylvania's rate of obesity was in the range of 20 percent to 24 percent in 2000 and 2005. For 2009, the prevalence went up into the range of 25 percent to 29 percent.

David Katz, director of Yale University's Prevention Research Center and renowned authority on nutrition, believes that focusing on weight is not the solution. "Some people get upset with a focus on weight, per se, thinking it will compound prevailing problems of weight bias and stigma," he explained. Instead, efforts should be directed toward fighting health threats caused by obesity.

Complications resulting from being overweight and obese range from social struggles to serious medical conditions. Obesity can be traced to "virtually every major chronic disease that plagues our society: diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, arthritis and more," said Dr. Katz.

The CDC has also estimated that Pennsylvania has a higher percentage of people with diabetes than most other states.

Although causes of type 2 diabetes are not completely understood, a few factors have been identified that may explain Pennsylvania's poor showing. Dr. Siminerio explained that the state has many lower socioeconomic communities, where there is a lack of healthy foods available and a lack of opportunities to be physically active. Staying healthy and preventing type 2 diabetes depends on both.

Pennsylvania is also put at a higher risk of diabetes because it contains a large population of senior citizens, Dr. Siminerio said. In older adults, insulin resistance increases, lifestyle changes are harder to make and additional medical conditions add to the challenge of treating diabetes.

NIH found in a 2007 study that the total direct and indirect cost of diabetes on the nation is estimated to be \$174 billion.

To help curb the local obesity trend, at least 10 agencies in the Pittsburgh area -- such as the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh -- have partnered with the UPMC Health Plan to initiate several programs under the national "We Can!" initiative.

Since participating in We Can!, the Children's Museum has hosted an array of activities each month, ranging from family dance parties to theater productions. Sport demonstrations are held, including a fencing event planned Aug. 21 at the North Side museum.

"One of the things we have been very impressed with 'We Can!' is that they are very highly organized on the national level," said Angela Seals, program director for the Children's Museum. She said the museum is committed to the program for at least another two years.

The Obama administration is building upon the efforts of the "We Can!" project with first lady Michelle Obama's launch earlier this year of an aggressive campaign to reduce childhood obesity -- the "Let's Move" initiative.

"Let's Move" promises a comprehensive school-family-community partnership to "combat the epidemic of childhood obesity."

With a family-oriented focus, the program offers guidance to families in making good choices in meal and snack planning with cooking videos, easy recipes and templates for setting goals.

UPMC nutritionist Leslie Bonci agrees that the fight against childhood obesity involves the entire family. "This is not about saying that somebody has a problem in the family," she said. "Everybody has to be willing to make the changes."

Communities are invited to become a "Let's Move" city and use the program to help parents and promote healthy schools, access to healthy and affordable food and physical activity.

As of this week, 131 communities have signed up to participate in "Let's Move." According to the program's website, Pittsburgh is one of those cities, but no organizer to get things moving has been announced.

It may be too early to judge the success of the "We Can!" and "Let's Move" programs, Ms. Seals said.

"It just takes time to build the layers you need in order to reach children in all of the places in the community where they are and reach them in ways that are highly relevant."

For more information, visit wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov and www.letsmove.gov.

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