



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**UPMC Health Plan Launches Initiative to Combat Obesity in Armstrong
Armstrong Students Get in Step with Good Health**

PITTSBURGH (September 24, 2007) — Andrew Rea is not your typical 6-year-old. The Armstrong County first grader is a devotee of the new food pyramid and frequently quizzes his parents on their portions of protein, carbohydrates, fruits, and vegetables. Andrew recently took up swimming and soccer to stay in shape while his 11-year-old sister regularly hops on the treadmill after school.

It wasn't always this way in the Rea household. Jennifer Rea, Andrew's mother, said the family was more sedentary, watched a bit more television, and certainly wasn't thinking about healthy portions.

"I can't say we had awful habits but we just weren't cautious about health," said Rea. "Since the HEALTHY Armstrong program began, we've really started to focus on getting in our five fruit and vegetable servings every day. We've all started walking more and my husband has even lost 60 pounds. There is a new focus in our family."

The Rea family is one of the most visible success stories of the HEALTHY Armstrong program, which stands for Healthy Eating and Active Lifestyles – Together Helping Youth. The HEALTHY Armstrong program is designed to create a countywide approach to rising numbers of overweight children and their related health risks. Spearheading the effort are program partners Armstrong School District, ACMH Hospital (Armstrong Center for Medicine and Health), ACMH Hospital Foundation, Children's Community Pediatrics-Armstrong, and UPMC Health Plan.

The kickoff of the program will be held at 10 a.m. on Sept. 27 at West Hills Intermediate School near Kittanning. A community wellness walk will be held at 8 a.m. on Sept. 29 on the ACMH Hospital grounds, also near Kittanning. The walking event will feature representatives from the HEALTHY Armstrong project and America On the Move in Pittsburgh, a nonprofit initiative designed to promote active living and healthy eating across the country.

An estimated 35 percent of children in the Armstrong School District – about 2,170 students – have a body mass index or BMI showing that they are heavier than 85 percent of children of their age and gender nationally, according to the first survey of the students conducted last year. Since planning for the program began more than two years ago, the school district has changed its menu to offer healthier foods and has eliminated soft drinks from vending machines in the schools. Most schools in the district now have in-school wellness programs and after-school programs in development.

"The rise of childhood obesity is a significant concern for all of us who are focused on improving the health of our community," says UPMC Health Plan President Diane P. Holder. "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 to establish a sense of community ownership and pride in the health of its children."

UPMC Health Plan has awarded a \$50,000 grant to support the program, which incorporates the National Institutes for Health's "We Can!" program, an easy-to-use wellness program for parents and teachers. As a result, the NIH has awarded Armstrong the nation's first designation as a "We Can County." The American Academy of Pediatrics also awarded a Community Access To Child Health (CATCH) implementation grant for a pilot of the project, which has been underway for two years at Elderton Elementary School. The ACMH Hospital Foundation has contributed more than \$20,000, and the Armstrong County Community Foundation \$2,500 toward the effort.

The program includes physical activities, snack-making advice from a nutritionist, and additional teaching about wellness. The school district is serving less pizza and French fries than before, among many other dietary improvements; and, in the winter, many students opt to walk the hallways during recess. Jennifer Rea even organized a year-end event at her children's school, which featured 13 physical activities such as karate and line dancing rather than the traditional carnival attractions.

"Working with children early in life to develop healthy eating and exercise habits is vital to developing healthy lifestyles as adults," says Holder. "We are pleased to be working with Armstrong School District, ACMH hospital, and Children's Community Pediatrics-Armstrong to help these kids take an important first step toward a lifetime of good health within the supportive environment of their schools."

While the HEALTHY Armstrong effort sets guiding principles at the county level, there are also seven school wellness committees operating within that framework—one for each elementary school in the Armstrong School District. The school wellness committees have the same goal: To raise student awareness about the importance of physical activity and nutritional knowledge. In early October, District wellness coordinator David Kristofic will create a schedule of activities for each school.

"Our hope is that entire families will get involved," said Chris DeVivo, substitute superintendent of schools. "Armstrong School District relies on help from parents and families to make their children's educational experience all it can be. This is no different: Wellness needs to be a family effort to be successful."

About UPMC Health Plan

UPMC Health Plan, the second-largest health insurer in Western Pennsylvania, is owned by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC), one of the nation's top-ranked health systems. The integrated partner companies of the UPMC Insurance Services Division – which includes UPMC Health Plan, Work Partners, EAP Solutions, UPMC *for You* (Medical Assistance), and Community Care Behavioral Health – offer a full range of group health insurance, Medicare, CHIP, Medical Assistance, behavioral health, employee assistance, and workers' compensation products and services to nearly 1 million members. Our local provider network includes UPMC as well as community providers, totaling more than 80 hospitals and more than 7,500 physicians in a 29-county region. For more information, visit www.upmchealthplan.com.

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