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Call it a 'lifestyle intervention'



Rebecca White and her husband, Marty, walk along River Road in Beaver, part of their routine exercise regimen. Rebecca enrolled in LifeSmart, a diabetes prevention program offered through Heritage Valley Health System in partnership with UPMC Health Plan, more than a year ago after she was diagnosed as being prediabetic.

LifeSmart puts Beaver woman on a path to a healthier lifestyle

By Marsha Keefer
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Mornings — usually before dawn's early light — find Rebecca White dutifully logging steps on a treadmill.

Like washing her hair or brushing her teeth, exercise and watching what she eats are now part of her daily ritual — a proactive path to a healthier lifestyle.

A little more than a year ago, the Beaver woman, an administrative technician at Women's Health Center in Center Township, received a wake-up call.

Routine lab tests, part of her annual physicals, showed her fasting blood sugar "creeping up," prompting her doctor to order a more specific test that provides an average over three months.

Those results, coupled with elevated cholesterol and weight, indicated she was "toppling over into prediabetes."

Without intervention, White could possibly transition to diabetes, a chronic illness with serious health complications. People with diabetes are at higher risk of blindness, kidney failure, heart disease, stroke and amputations of toes, feet or legs.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, without lifestyle modifications such as weight loss and moderate physical activity, 15 to 30 percent of people with prediabetes will develop type-2 diabetes within five years.

White, whose family also has a history of cardiac issues and whose mother died of a stroke four years ago, knew it was time to take action.

With her doctor's referral, she enrolled in LifeSmart, a diabetes prevention program offered through Heritage Valley Health System in partnership with UPMC Health Plan. LifeSmart, she said, also came highly recommended by a co-worker whose sister-in-law completed the program with resounding results.

People with prediabetes, metabolic syndrome and obesity are at greater risk for developing diabetes, said Arlene Bell, director of Heritage Valley's Community Health Services that manages LifeSmart. And, she added, the rate of obesity in this country is "increasing at an alarming rate."

While 29 million people in the United States have been diagnosed with the disease, Bell said "86 million people are walking around with prediabetes and



SYLVESTER WASHINGTON JR./THE TIMES

probably don't know. ... That's why this (LifeSmart) is so important."

Diabetes is a chronic disease, said Erika Sheffield, a nurse, registered dietitian and LifeSmart lifestyle coach coordinator.

"Once it's diagnosed, it doesn't go away. It's something you manage for the rest of your life. Once your vision is blurry, you can't change that. All you can do is try to prevent further damage. It really is a serious disease. Once you develop it, it can't be reversed."

But diabetes can be prevented, Bell and Sheffield emphasized, by maintaining a healthy weight and active lifestyle.

Since LifeSmart's introduction in 2008, approximately 2,000 people — from those in the workforce to stay-at-home moms — have enrolled in the program, said Bell, which emphasizes healthy eating and physical activity.

And the best part? LifeSmart is free, Bell said, underwritten by "the generous support" of Heritage Valley's foundation and UPMC Health Plan.

Candidates are referred by physicians based on risk factors, said Sheffield.

Those factors include a diagnosis of prediabetes; body mass index greater

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**ERIKA SHEFFIELD,
REGISTERED NURSE
// ON MANAGING
DIABETES**

or equal to 30 or BMI greater or equal to 25 with two or more of the following: fasting blood sugar greater than 100 milligrams per deciliters but less than 126; triglycerides greater than 150 mg/dl; HDL cholesterol less than 50 mg/dl for women or less than 40 for men; LDL cholesterol greater than or equal to 150 mg/dl; blood pressure greater than or equal to 130/85; and waist circumference greater than 35 inches for women or greater than 40 inches for men.

The six-month program consists of 12, one-hour, weekly sessions the first three months, followed by one session a month for three months.

For convenience, class starting dates are staggered to run throughout the year and held in various Heritage Valley service areas in Beaver and Allegheny counties.

"We average 13 to 14 classes per year," Bell said, including sites in Beaver, Sewickley and Moon and Chippewa townships, for example. Classes are from 4 to 5 p.m. or 6 to 7 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays. Class sizes vary based on location, but usually 15 to 30 people attend, some of them couples.

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Time to prepare for a Valentine’s date night again

It’s Valentine’s Day, and my husband and I have plans.

Which is sort of like saying “Donald Trump will strike the word ‘great’ from his vocabulary.”

That is, pretty darned amazing. Borderline unbelievable.

This year, the holiday happened to fall on my husband’s day off. Our kids are finally old and responsible enough that we don’t have to worry about babysitters. (Which we never used anyway, but that’s another story.)

Let me backtrack.

“So, Valentine’s Day is coming up,” my husband said a couple weeks ago, which is his way of addressing the fact that even though he’s known me for three decades and I’m not a huge fan of Valentine’s Day, the holiday makes him jittery. And when he’s jittery, he veers toward reckless impulsivity.

“Do not — I repeat do not — buy me a giant teddy bear,” I said. “I also don’t want a case of giant chocolate-covered berries. In fact, no need to buy me giant anything at all. Seriously.”

“Nothing?”

I thought for a moment. “Actually, a Costco gift card would be nice.”

“I can’t get you a Costco gift card for Valentine’s Day.”

So there we were, at an impasse.

We stared at each other, neither willing to budge.

“Let’s go out to dinner,” we said, simultaneously. “Somewhere nice.”

For a couple like us — to whom a night out is grabbing an Arby’s value meal after driving some kid-related carpool — the prospect of a normal evening out is thrilling and mystifying at the same time.

“What do people wear these days?” I said, staring at my closet of yoga pants and over-sized hoodies bearing the names of colleges my children have



CHARLOTTE LATVALA

gone to or are considering going to. (In a perfect world I would happily sell myself as a walking billboard for a tuition discount.)

“Wear whatever you want,” said my husband, being cheerfully unhelpful. “You always look great.”

The reality is, my days of tossing on a T-shirt dress and a handful of hair gel and getting by on youthful radiance are long gone. Creating a passable look takes a certain amount of sculpting and artistry. And honestly, it’s not a project I’m usually willing to invest in.

But, hey, Valentine’s Day. Just knowing we would be in public with other human beings who put more thought into their appearance than “I doubt anyone will notice the spaghetti sauce on my WVU hoodie; it’s practically the same color!” made me want to up my game.

So I did a trial run. With makeup and everything.

“There’s got to be eye shadow here somewhere,” I thought, digging through the bathroom drawers. At one point I remember a bunch of samples floating around the house. Or maybe those were detergent packets.

Anyway, there’s a big advantage to having a college-age daughter. In her room, I found a bounty of cast-off makeup, hair products and even an adorable red shrug sweater I can just squeeze into.

It might even fit over my NYU sweatshirt.

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LifeSmart puts woman on path to healthier lifestyle

LIFESTYLE, from C1

“Really, to make a lifestyle change, it must be a family affair,” said Sheffield.

LifeSmart helps participants “identify trends and patterns in their eating habits,” she said, guiding them to make healthy food choices based on nutrition education, control food portions and increase physical activity.

Participants aren’t necessarily given diets to follow, but rather smart choices — “knowledge so they can adjust their eating habits based on calorie needs and what they like to eat,” Sheffield said, stressing that the program is a “lifestyle intervention.”

They learn to read and understand food labels and are asked to record what they eat — meals and snacks — in a journal.

“Journaling is not used as a punishment,” Sheffield said, “but to make you more aware of when you’re eating and what you’re eating.”

Most people, she said, underestimate their calorie intake and overestimate their activity.

“LifeSmart holds you accountable,” White said.

“If you look at what you eat, oh shame, shame. It’s an eye-opener.”

Today, she can rattle calorie, fat gram and sugar content in certain foods off the top of her head.

“At first it was a pain to do,” she said of keeping a food diary, “but now it’s kind of fun.”

Take English muffins, for instance. She knows a Thomas’ Original has 120 calories, but a better choice, she said, is a whole-wheat muffin.

Sweets, she confessed, have always been her weakness.

Things like candy and ice cream sundaes drizzled with chocolate and caramel sauces topped with pecans. Until she learned the ice cream treat packs 650 calories — 270 from fat with 70 grams of sugar.

She likes French vanilla creamer in her coffee, but never measured how much she added. Instead, she went by look, adding creamer until the coffee turned a light peanut butter color.

“I would put six or seven” teaspoons, she estimated, chagrined when she learned one teaspoon — a recommended serving — has 35 calories.

“Oh, my gosh,” she said. By giving up the extra creamer, she could have saved those calories for more wholesome fruits, vegetables or protein.

White also learned about portion sizes, too. For example, a recommended serving of cheese, she said, is actually the equivalent of a pair of dice. A serving of meat is 3 ounces, about the size of a deck of cards.

LifeSmart doesn’t just tell you to lose weight, White said, but guides you toward healthier food choices and portion control.

“Once you learn portion control, it’s an eye-opening experience,” she said.

Exercise, too, is a big part of a healthy lifestyle.

LifeSmart suggests a minimum 150 minutes a week, which breaks down to 30 minutes five days a week — very manageable, White said.

She’s a morning person and carves out 30 minutes to walk a treadmill before going to work.

“I’m always active, doing something,” she said, “but what a difference when you do a little bit more. You just feel so much better.”

Most days, she’ll walk again in the evening and weekends with husband Marty, who’s been very supportive of her healthy lifestyle. She also enjoys bike riding, kayaking and bowling.

Sheffield lauds such effort.

“The most important thing is for them to keep moving,” she said.

White also learned the importance of meal planning. When dining out, split meals with someone or ask for a to-go box before the meal is served and take half home for another meal, she said.

“That helps a lot not only on your wallet but with portion control.”

And don’t forget to drink plenty of water, she added.

“It is definitely a commitment,” White said of LifeSmart, but one that has paid off.

It helped her take control of her numbers — cholesterol, blood sugar, blood pressure, weight — “they all came down,” she said. “What a difference it makes when you stick with it and how much healthier you feel.”

“I’m glad I did it. I really like the program. It’s excellent.”

To learn more about LifeSmart, call 866-328-8389.

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