

Food for thought: Healthier habits and happier families

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A broad-based coalition united five years ago to do something about the growing numbers of overweight children in Santa Cruz County.

More than 150 groups came together under the auspices of the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust and United Way of Santa Cruz County, agreeing on a 24-point plan to increase healthy eating and physical activity for children.

The plan was a call to action, reaching out to young people, parents, doctors, educators, employers and city planners.

Four and half years later, those involved in the Go for Health! coalition see progress.

"We were in the top 10 in the state for high rates of obesity when we wrote the plan," said Shebreh Kalantari of United Way of Santa Cruz County, a leader in Go for Health! "In 2007, we went down to 29th."

People now are aware of the problems created by being overweight and are taking steps to address it.

Throughout the county, school districts have adopted student wellness policies. Employers have adopted workplace wellness programs. Last October, doctors endorsed the "5210" campaign developed by the Maine Youth Overweight Collaborative. The numbers stand for:

- 5: Eating five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.
- 2: Limiting TV/video game time to two hours or less a day.
- 1: Participating in one or more hours of physical activity every day.
- 0: Eliminating soda and sugar-sweetened drinks, replacing them with water and low-fat or fat-free milk.

In Maine, doctors participating in a two-year project made great strides in addressing weight issues, physical activity and sugar-sweetened beverages with their patients.

Members of Jovenes Sanos, a Watsonville youth group affiliated with United Way, have taken leadership in three areas, asking school officials, city officials and local market owners for their support.

Priscilla Serrano, 17, persuaded the owner of Fruteria Quetzal to put a "5210" poster in her market near the high school. She has learned to watch what she eats.

"All the time you see junk food," she said. "They make it seem healthy when it's not."

Xochitl Garcia, 17, attended the meeting when the Watsonville City Council agreed to form a task force to look into the teens' proposal to limit fast-food outlets near the schools.

"The mayor spoke for us," she said. "That was cool."

Watsonville's Public Works Department is looking at ways to increase bike lanes, another suggestion from the youth.

Last year, the United Way of Santa Cruz County honored eight local restaurants for making an effort to achieve high standards in nutrition.

One is in Watsonville, the Galley at West Marine. There also was one winner in Felton, Redwood Pizzeria, Auntie Mame's in Scotts Valley, Red Pearl in Boulder Creek and Walnut Avenue Cafe, Peachwood's, Falafel House and the Alfresco kiosk in Santa Cruz.

In September, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill that made California the first state in the nation to require menu labeling at chain restaurants.

"We're really excited that passed," said Kalantari, who would like to see more involvement by the restaurant industry.

At Women Infants Children in Watsonville, the federally funded food program, staffers are educating mothers about the benefits of breastfeeding, the hazard of too much sugar and how to read labels that are required on packaged foods.

Despite the signs of progress, those involved say there is much more to do.

"This is not a problem that will be solved in a single generation," said Kathleen King, executive director of the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust.

Here are some stories of people who have made a difference in their eating habits and their lives.

Mother of four taught her children to read nutrition labels

Blanca Zamora, 38, has worked for 10 years at Women Infants Children in Watsonville, a federally funded program that provides nutritious foods to pregnant women, breastfeeding moms and kids under age 5. When her supervisor, Cathy Cavanaugh, talked about motivating women to adopt healthy habits for life, Zamora took the message to heart. Little by little, she made changes at home for her husband, a driver for GreenWaste, and her four children, ages, 16, 12, 10 and 3.

WHAT SHE EATS: I make my lunch the night before. Sometimes it's leftovers from dinner. I add an apple or a banana. I always drink water. I changed how I cook, a little at a time. I do more baking, less frying. I use extra-virgin oil now, not Mazola. I buy 100 percent juice, not sodas. I switched from ground beef to turkey. It tastes great; my kids love it. My husband does the cooking Monday through Thursday; I do it Friday through Sunday. In the beginning, my husband wondered why are we doing this, but he got used to the taste of the food. He's lost a couple of pounds.

HOW SHE EXERCISES: At work, we get a 15-minute break in the morning and the afternoon, so we take a 15-minute walk. My family and I are starting something new. We will walk to the high school and go up and down the steps there. It's a 15-20 minute walk. We will try to do it four times a week when I get home from work. My husband got weights for our son because he wants to play football; they're doing it together. I want to do it, too.

HOW HER FAMILY IS AFFECTED: My kids eat at school. The food is getting better; there's a salad bar, I send water with them. I buy 100 percent juice and granola bars at Costco for snacks. I don't give my 12-year-old money to buy snacks. At Halloween, when they get bags full of candy, we let them eat it a little at a time; some we give away. We told our son who plays soccer "If you score a goal, we will get you an Xbox." He scored a goal and now he has an Xbox. He has a 30-minute limit on weekdays, and one hour on weekend days.

QUOTE: "You have to look at the labels when you buy juice. The label says 100 percent Vitamin C, but it's not 100 percent juice. You pay less but then you pay more in dental bills, more health problems. My son had two cavities and it cost \$1,200."

He lowered his bad' cholesterol by eating four times a day

Jim Holmquist, 59, of Corralitos, manager of Graniterock's Santa Cruz location, signed up for his company's wellness program because he wanted to lower his "bad" cholesterol. The program assigned him to a doctor who provided one-on-one consultation on nutrition and fitness. In six months, he accomplished his goal -- and lost five pounds. Company-wide, 270 employees participated, losing 1,400 pounds.

WHAT HE EATS: Working with the doctor, we changed my eating habits. Before, I never ate breakfast, and if I did I had a breakfast burrito, which was not the best. I didn't have time for lunch and then I had dinner. Now I eat four times a day. We looked at food groups and I got a whole lot of options. There's eight or nine fast-food items I can have, like the soft tacos on the Taco Bell menu. They're 160 calories.

HOW HE EXERCISES: Before, I ran five, six or seven days a week, three miles each time. I found myself, quite frankly, in a rut. The doctor made me realize that I had to change my physical workouts if I wanted to do more than maintain my weight. Now I increase my speed for a short period, or I run up and down hills. Or I ride a bike or swim at a gym. In the evening, I walk the dog with my wife for 45 minutes. You have a quiet time to talk, and you're doing exercise that's not hard to do.

HOW HIS FAMILY IS AFFECTED: What was good about this program is it naturally went into the family. My wife and my kids were interested. I have two daughters, ages 25 and 22. My kids cracked up when I brought home the menus of fast food I could eat. I had 10 menus, but none from Taco Bell. That's one of my daughter's favorites, so I asked about the Taco Bell menu.

QUOTE: "One of my co-workers lost 25 pounds just by not drinking regular soda. He was drinking five or six sodas a day. Have you looked at what's in soda? It's like drinking sugar."

Young man drops soda, trades online game for football

Jose De La Torre, 11, looks a lot healthier, and his mother, Maricela, is quite proud. A sixth-grader at Pajaro Middle School, Jose is the youngest of her six children. He had developed some bad eating habits; being 5 feet tall and 173 pounds put him at risk of diabetes. Working with dietitian Danielle Cook at the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust, he is setting an example for other young people to follow. Three months after changing what he eats, his body mass index has dropped from 32.9 to 30.8; a normal score ranges between 18.5 and 24.9.

WHAT HE EATS: He started eating breakfast, choosing yogurt and fruit like an apple or mandarin orange or an egg sandwich. He stopped drinking two or three sodas a day and substituted smaller 6-ounce portions of orange or apple juice. He eats lots of vegetables, soups, chicken breast, salmon and tilapia -- no red meat. His mother says he makes his own vegetable stew. His favorite vegetables are broccoli, celery, cauliflower, carrots and potatoes. When he eats chicken, he removes all the fat.

HOW HE EXERCISES: Instead of playing the online adventure game RuneScape for hours at a time, he plays flag football, practicing two hours a day after school five days a week.

HOW HIS FAMILY IS AFFECTED: Jose is teaching his mother exercises he's learned. To reduce the fat in what she cooks, his mother uses canola oil instead of Mazola; she steams rice instead of making Spanish rice. She goes to Costco or Safeway to buy salmon that isn't sold at the market where she shops. She reads the labels on food packages for the nutritional content before she buys. His father knows better than to bring home fast food. If the family goes out to eat, they pick a place with healthier choices, like Subway.

QUOTE: "I was a size 36 and now I wear size 32 and the pants are loose. I grew 3 inches without gaining any weight."