
Shebreh Kalantari and Leslie Goodfriend: A healthy diet pays off in many ways

By: Shebreh Kalantari and Leslie Goodfriend

Along with the rest of California and the United States overall, Santa Cruz County has been experiencing increasing rates of obesity and diabetes. By now, many of us are aware of the toll that unhealthy diets and lack of physical activity can take on our health and well-being. But did you know that overweight, obesity and physical inactivity also take a huge bite out of state and county budgets?

A recent report from the California Center for Public Health Advocacy tells us that in just six years, the economic costs of excessive weight and insufficient activity have almost doubled -- reaching \$41 billion a year.

If current trends continue, by 2011, the cost of overweight, obesity and physical inactivity in California is projected to reach \$52 billion -- about half the state's current budget. The costs are driven by medical care, prescription drugs and lost productivity. In Santa Cruz County, the 2006 costs associated with these three factors ran to a whopping \$317 million.

No state or county can afford these costs in the long run. The good news is that both the costs and the conditions that drive them can be reversed. Even small changes add up to big bucks: if the rate of physical activity and healthy weight improved just 5 percent over the next five years, we could be trimming \$12 billion from California's obesity costs -- and we'd be a healthier population, as well as a cheaper one!

Here in Santa Cruz County, we're working hard to create the policies and environments that make it easier to lead a healthier life. Three local coalitions -- Go for Health!, Regional Diabetes Collaborative and the Health Improvement Partnership, supported by local funders such as the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust -- have brought together local medical providers, hospitals, the health department, schools, and others to promote physical activity, healthy eating and diabetes prevention. Programs like the 52-10 campaign remind us to give kids and ourselves a message of eating five servings of fruits and vegetables every day, limiting screen time to two hours a day, getting at least an hour of physical activity every day, and keeping soda and other sweetened beverages to a healthy amount: zero.

A group of young people in Watsonville have become advocates for themselves and their community by forming a group, Jovenes Sanos, that is working to bring more healthy food options to their schools and neighborhoods.

Bike lanes, schools opening up their playgrounds and fields to residents, safe parks and walkable trails, getting more fresh fruit and vegetables into corner markets -- all of these are ways that neighborhoods across Santa Cruz County can make healthy eating and active living an easier part of daily life.

It took California and the nation decades to get into this combined health and budget crisis. We won't turn this around overnight. By working together to incorporate healthy living into every aspect of the county's plans for the future, we're confident that a healthier Santa Cruz County is on the horizon. Next problem: what should we do with the \$300 million in savings?

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