

Health groups take aim at 'twin' epidemics

Do you know a friend, relative or colleague who has been diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes? In Santa Cruz County, like the rest of the country, there's a good chance that you do: as of 2004, about 7 percent of the

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county's 260,000 residents, or 18,000 people, had been diagnosed with diabetes. Some local estimates place medical expenses, disability, work loss and premature

mortality for these 18,000 cases alone at \$116 million per year.

If you live or work in the Pajaro Valley, the chances that you know someone with diabetes (or have the disease yourself) are even higher. According to the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust's 2007 report and survey, "A Glimpse of Reality, Health Disparities in the Pajaro Valley," 8.2 percent of South County residents reported that a doctor told them they have diabetes (other than during pregnancy), compared to only 3.5 percent in the rest of the county.

The same pattern holds for obesity — a condition so tightly linked to diabetes that the two are

called "twin" epidemics. In 2006, the California Center for Public Health Policy reported that over a third of the Watsonville area's fifth, seventh and ninth grade students were overweight, compared with nearly a quarter of students in the rest of the County.

These human and dollar figures are probably undercounts. In addition to diabetes itself, many more county residents could be experiencing a condition called pre-diabetes. Pre-diabetes means your blood sugar levels are elevated, but don't yet meet the official threshold for a diabetes diagnosis. It's a warning sign that your heart and circulatory system are under strain and could be damaged.

The good news about diabetes and pre-diabetes is that prevention really is possible. With healthier diets, more routine physical activity, and closely monitored medications, people with pre-diabetes or even full-blown diabetes can either prevent the disease altogether or keep it under control.

Even though prevention is possible, it's a tremendous challenge that no single organization can hope to tackle alone. The Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County (a local countywide collaborative of

health, foundation, government and community leaders) is convening the many partners working on this issue, training and supporting health providers to address obesity and diabetes, and working to strengthen the response of our entire countywide health system.

A key member of HIP is the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust, whose mission is to improve health and the quality of life in the Pajaro Valley. The trust operates the Diabetes Health Center (DHC), located adjacent to Watsonville Hospital, and convenes a strong Regional Diabetes Collaborative that spans Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Benito counties.

The DHC's bilingual, bicultural team serves anyone with diabetes, but focuses on Santa Cruz County residents hit hardest by this disease: low-income, Spanish-speaking farm and service industry workers who lack health insurance. (Salud Para La Gente in Watsonville and Casa de la Cultura in Pajaro also provide diabetes education and treatment to this population.)

The DHC's staff are certified in diabetes care and nutrition education and work in tandem with a patient's physician so that appropriate medications are part of

the equation, too. Many of DHC's provider partners work within local safety net clinics, which provide high-quality primary care to thousands of low-income residents. The Safety Net Clinic Coalition is also a member of HIP and recently launched a collaborative program at the county health clinics to provide digital retinal screenings to identify and treat vision-threatening conditions related to diabetes.

The DHC, a direct service program of the trust, is supported by foundation grants and generous local donors. Broad-based community support allows the DHC to offer its services to all clients, regardless of insurance status or ability to pay. The DHC's annual outreach efforts help raise awareness of diabetes and teach community residents the importance of diabetes prevention and screening.

For more information about the DHC or an appointment with a certified diabetes educator, please call (831) 763-6445.

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