

THE BUFFALO NEWS

FOCUS: DIET AND EXERCISE Commitment to fitness?

Many people make a New Year's resolution to shape up and slim down, but grim statistics here and nationwide show fat is way ahead of fit

By JAY REY
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Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News Bryan Marche, of Cheektowaga, works out in the Village Glen Tennis & Fitness Club in Williamsville, where he has been a regular for 18 years. Fitness facilities absorb a post-holidays influx of health-conscious adults hoping to shed a few pounds.

Grim report card

Health facts for Western New Yorkers

- Buffalo Niagara has nearly twice the strokes per capita as the rest of the state: 74.7 deaths per 100,000 people, compared with 41.8 statewide, 25.2 in New York City and 60.9 nationally.
- Buffalo Niagara has the worst death rates for heart disease in the state — 351.7 per 100,000, compared with 305.2 statewide and 258.2 nationally.

Source: Research Center for Stroke and Heart Disease at Kaleida Health, 2000.

It happens each year at this time.

People with paunchy waistlines pack health clubs, resolving that this is the year they finally get fit.

But if there's anywhere exercise should mean more than just a passing New Year's resolution it's the Buffalo region, where the death rates from heart disease and stroke are among the highest in the nation.

"I want my heart to be healthier," said Sue Anders, 48, as she worked out at the Village Glen Tennis & Fitness Club in Williamsville. "I'm trying to prevent health problems as I age."

Clearly, the message - exercise, eat less, eat healthier - is getting out. That advice was reiterated as recently as this week, when the federal government released new dietary guidelines.

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Yet, the message isn't completely getting through.

The nation is getting fatter. Two in three adult Americans are overweight. And not only are people gaining weight, but they're gaining so much that obesity has become an epidemic.

"We're still out of balance," said Dr. Joan M. Dorn, associate professor of social and preventive medicine at the University at Buffalo. "Our calorie intake is still exceeding the amount we're burning, and until that balance is achieved, we are not going to lose weight."

The average weight for U.S. men increased by 25 pounds over the past 40 years, while weight for the nation's women rose 24 pounds, according to a recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

An estimated 64 percent of U.S. adults are either overweight or obese, most recent CDC surveys show.

Despite the expanding waistlines, health experts believe the message is at least getting out that physical activity is essential to maintaining good health and lowering the risks of disease.

In West Seneca, for instance, a promotion by the YMCA of Greater Buffalo in the first week of January added 100 new memberships a day at its Southtowns Family Branch.

"I would describe it as the day after Thanksgiving in a shopping mall," said Rob Walker, executive director of the branch. "We really didn't expect the results we got last week."

"I couldn't walk as far without getting tired," said Catherine Sottile, 55, who works out with her daughter, Cristin, at the Village Glen. "I said, 'It's time to get off the couch and start to do something.'"

Health care providers

Probably a better gauge than the new year's rush to the gym is the growing recognition of health and fitness by government and the health care industry, which face spiraling medical costs.

The region's three major health care providers - Blue Cross Blue Shield of Western New York, Independent Health and Univera - a few years ago started offering health insurance options that included a free three-month membership to specified gyms or up to \$300 toward the cost.

"That's one of the things that got me here," said Anders, of Clarence, who has been working out at the Village Glen for 10 months. "I got a free three-month membership just to try it. I wasn't out anything."

What many don't understand, though, is today's lifestyle has become so sedentary, it takes a tremendous amount of work to compensate, said Dorn, the UB professor.

It would take, for example, a 150-pound person at least an hour to an hour and a half of moderate running to burn off a McDonald's Big Mac.

That means making time to exercise, as well as changing eating habits, said Dr. Anthony J. Billittier IV, Erie County health commissioner.

"I just don't know how you get people to do that," Billittier said. "Changing behavior is probably the hardest thing to do, especially when it comes to what you eat. It's the American way to eat food that's not good for you."

Meanwhile, many of those who started the new year exercising regularly often get frustrated and give up

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when they haven't met their unrealistic goals, said Tom Haney, executive director of the Village Glen.

After the January influx, gyms traditionally see a drop in attendance as early as February or March.

It's probably no surprise that a recent nonscientific survey by Men's Health magazine ranked Buffalo 69th out of 101 healthiest American cities for men. Buffalo scored a D for men's health and an F for fitness.

Federal guidelines recommend all Americans get at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day.

The recent trend, Dorn said, is to help people integrate physical activity throughout their day - maybe a brisk 10-minute walk from the parking lot to the office, another during lunch and a return walk to the car at the end of the day.

Though, Anders said she will stick with her workouts at the Village Glen.

"It's just getting here and making it become a way of life," Anders said. "You know in your heart you should lose weight, but until you start to not feeling good . . . that spurred me."

High death rate

But those without an exercise routine should also consider this: The Buffalo Niagara region has the worst death rate for heart disease in the state - 351.7 cases per 100,000 population, compared with 258.2 in the nation and 305.2 statewide, according to 2000 data from the Research Center for Stroke & Heart Disease at Kaleida Health.

The regional rate of stroke deaths is 74.7 per 100,000 people, compared with 60.9 in the United States and 41.8 statewide, that research showed.

There are other contributing factors - lack of nutrition, poverty, smoking - but studies have shown exercise helps lower the risk of heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers. Some worry that message is getting lost.

"People need to understand they need to exercise whether they lose weight or not," said Dr. Carlos Crespo, Dorn's colleague at the University at Buffalo. "The only thing many people have on their mind is to lose weight or look good."

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Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News Bridget Saviola of Eggertsville works out at the Village Glen Tennis and Fitness Club in Williamsville, which she joined in October. It's the first time she joined such a facility.

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