

## Obesity is a matter of great weight

By DONN ESMONDE

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We're Number One.

It wasn't easy. But after generations of ethnic foods, hunker-down winters and suburbs-without-sidewalks, we did it. The explosion of immobilizing video games, chicken wings with bleu cheese, fries-with-gravy, a 4 a.m. drinking/smoking culture and Friday fish fries has reaped us a grim reward.

In case you missed the story in Monday's News, a recent Kaleida Health study confirmed the obvious: We have a growth industry around here. Unfortunately, it's in strokes, heart attacks and other health-cripplers connected to personal supersizing.

We're among the nation's leaders in health woes fast-tracked by french fries and fettucine alfredo.

There was nearly a panic last year at the arrival of West Nile virus. Death toll here from the mosquito-carried virus: One. Local deaths from stroke and heart attack in a recent year: 6,743.

It's not the mosquitoes that are getting us, folks.

We lead the nation in people who frighten impressionable children when they strip down to a bathing suit at the beach. We have a legion who think the answer to expanding bulk is larger sweat clothes. We set the pace in people with, well, more to love.

The sad thing is it's not funny.

We've got about twice as many overweight people as most places. Carrying an extra 50 or 100 pounds is like permanently hauling airport luggage. If vital organs charged for working overtime, a chunky chunk of the population would get a hefty bill.

Granted, it's not just about eating too much and moving too little. Genetics plays a part in weight and disease. And the pressure on girls to have a supermodel body brings trouble at the other end.

But we've mainly got ourselves to blame. Generation after generation. It gives new meaning to the term Fat City.

"Parents pass their (eating and exercise) habits onto their children," said Gretchen Fierle of Moving in Faith, which sends the health message through churches. "It keeps going, unless someone breaks the chain."

The chain can break. People can fight - and win.

Julie Judd is 33, dark hair and blue eyes, quiet and easy to talk to. She lives in South Buffalo, her kids are 3, 5 and 7, and she lost in six months what it took years to gain: 47 pounds. It was a lot of little changes.

She walked the 10 minutes to Cazenovia Park, instead of driving. She graduated from daily 45-minute walks to Nautilus and aerobic workouts at the gym. She stopped the two-fisted snacking after the kids were in bed - by reading instead of watching TV.

"You need two hands to hold a book," she said. "If you're watching TV, there's always a free hand to reach for the chips."

She was tired of feeling tired. And there was a family history of heart attacks. So when Moving in Faith came to her church last year with an exercise-eating program, she signed up. And changed her ways.

It was skinless, broiled chicken instead of fried. Salad with low-fat dressing instead of a cheeseburgers. A bunch of grapes instead of a bowl of chips. No more french fries with bleu cheese - a nutritional vice to rival Elvis' fried peanut butter-and-banana sandwiches.

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"It wasn't as hard to give it up," she said, "as I thought it would be."

The pounds rolled off. She wasn't huge, but the bad foods and the triple pregnancies had her muscle tone begging for mercy.

"You really do have more energy," she said after shedding 47. "I wasn't falling asleep on the couch every night after putting the kids to bed."

It's a happy ending, except it doesn't end there. She gained back 20 pounds. Which only shows how hard the fight can be - especially in a place of long winters and little work.

Her husband, Bob, lost his job. That forced her to work full time at the bank, which cut into workout and meal prep time. Broiled chicken got bumped for frozen pizza. No more money for fitness club dues. Buying a house redlined the stress, which drove her to the refrigerator. Winter ended the morning walks.

She vows to keep fighting. You don't lose 47 pounds without learning something.

Julie Judd learned she can win.

So can we.

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