OBESITY RATES PAVE THE ROAD TO CANCER DISPARITIES

Obesity is a risk factor for several types of cancer, including breast and colorectal cancers, as well as for chronic diseases such as diabetes, stroke, hypertension and heart disease.

The 1999-2000 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey estimates that 31% of Americans twenty years of age and older are obese; and an additional 33% are overweight. This represents an 8% increase in overweight and obesity compared to estimates from a previous survey (1988-1994). While obesity is on the rise nationwide for all ethnic groups, the rates are highest among African Americans, Mexican Americans and American Indians. And, obesity affects women more than men in the US, especially among low income.

The link between obesity and cancer suggests that groups with higher obesity rates in time, may also experience higher rates of cancer. In Los Angeles (LA) County, where an estimated 19.3% of adults are obese, certain neighborhoods are affected more than others. According to a Los Angeles Department of Health Services report, the highest rates occur in South LA, where 30% of adults are obese. Rates are also high in East LA, where 24% of adults are obese. Among ethnic groups in LA County, African Americans have the highest obesity rate (31%) followed by Latinos (24%) and whites (16%).

Access to affordable healthier food options and open spaces can make a big difference in the fight against obesity.

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2nd Annual CORICA Symposium

OBESITY PREVENTION: FINDING THE ANSWERS TOGETHER

The UCLA CORICA Network held its 2nd Annual Symposium on May 10, at the Radisson Wilshire Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles.

This year’s event brought together over 225 people, representing more than 100 community-based organizations to identify ways that community-university research partnerships could strengthen obesity prevention and control efforts.

Lectures by UCLA faculty underscored four major concerns: (1) The growing burden of obesity, (2) Biological connections between obesity and cancer, (3) Cultural influences, and (4) Childhood obesity.

Four break-out sessions allowed attendees to examine solutions to obesity from different angles: (1) Using Advocacy & Data To Influence Policy, (2) Building Community Alliances to Reduce Obesity, (3) Fostering Multicultural Knowledge of Obesity Reduction, and (4) Exploring Community Strategies for Obesity Prevention.

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LATINO 5 A DAY: Helping Communities Face Obesity Head On

The Latino 5 a Day Campaign, a state-wide effort led regionally by UC Cooperative Extension, works with Latino communities throughout LA County to promote understanding of the health benefits associated with eating a variety of different colored fruits and vegetables.

Latinos a Day also promotes physical activity in conjunction with generous fruit and vegetable consumption as vital components of a healthy, active lifestyle that reduces the risk for certain chronic diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes.

The Campaign empowers Latino families to consume the recommended daily amount of fruits and vegetables and enjoy at least 30 minutes of physical activity daily.

Using the 5 a Day and Physical Activity Toolbox for Community Educators, group facilitators guide participants through lessons designed to elicit teamwork as individuals work in small groups to: (1) Identify healthful ways to prepare fruits and vegetables, (2) Explore ways to incorporate 5 a Day recipes in their daily meal plans, and (3) Increase their familiarity with recommended “serving size” for various fresh, frozen, juiced, canned, and dried fruits and vegetables.

Teamwork allows the group to strategize ways to overcome these obstacles and name at least three ways that fruits and vegetables can be added to their lunches and snacks.

Participants also identify effective ways to advocate for improving the availability, access and quality of fruits and vegetables at their local restaurants, workplace cafeterias and communities.

Marvin Espinoza, director of the Los Angeles Regional Latino & Children’s 5 a Day Campaign says, “Latinos a Day gives participants the opportunity to understand that they can be the catalyst for change in their communities.”

Access to affordable healthier food options and open spaces can make a big difference in the fight against obesity.

There are fewer healthy food resources in low-income neighborhoods of LA County. For example, a study of over 200 LA neighborhoods found that there are three to four times more supermarkets in mostly white neighborhoods compared to mostly African American ones, and in high-income neighborhoods compared to poorer areas. Likewise, restaurants in poor neighborhoods often promote unhealthy food options to local residents. Research also shows that healthier foods cost more than fatty, high-calorie foods.

The lack of access to safe public spaces makes matters worse. A California study examining physical activity in adolescents reported that youth with access to safe parks engage in regular physical activity more often than those without such access. Yet, one in four California teens do not have access to a safe space for physical activity. This is a particularly pressing issue in urban settings such as LA, where a lack of safe, public parks deter teens from low-income families from engaging in daily physical activity.

The public health community faces the challenge of identifying ways to increase healthier food choices and physical activity levels using approaches that target not only individual behavior but also the environment. For example, measures that transform schools, workplaces and communities into spaces that offer an array of healthy food choices and meaningful physical activity can help prevent obesity.

Research and collaborations between academic, community and government groups are needed to study how existing environmental resources and spaces can be transformed into places that facilitate healthier lifestyles choices.

To find out if your organization qualifies to obtain a free 5 a Day and Physical Activity Toolbox for Community Educators, contact Alejandrina Orozco at 323-260-3828 (orozco@ucdavis.edu).

References

To weave together diverse perspectives to reduce cancer disparities.

At the end of the day, participants recognized that university-community research partnerships can support efforts to (1) develop an evidence base for multi-level interventions, policy changes and advocacy; (2) design, pilot, and test interventions that enhance the cultural competence of health care delivery and disease prevention systems; and (3) generate data to leverage program funding.

Participants called for a systems-level approach to obesity prevention which targets families, children and communities. Therefore, schools, worksites, health care settings and neighborhoods were identified as the institutions of choice for obesity prevention interventions.