

At-risk families reboot lifestyles to nip an obesity epidemic

By Deborah Busemeyer | For The New Mexican

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Photo by: Natalie Guillén/The New Mexican

Diana Garcia is trying to overcome family history, low wages and lack of information to develop a healthier lifestyle for herself and her family. She's waging her battle with the help of La Familia Medical Center's new home-visiting program, which targets children at risk for becoming obese.

Garcia grew up with four sisters in a trailer park off Airport Road. Her father worked every day but Sunday, and her mom didn't drive. There was no neighborhood park.

"We'd just sit in the house," she said. "We didn't have any activity. I guess that's why I didn't put my son into any activity."

Her husband works long hours, sometimes accepting double shifts as a cook at a local restaurant. So she's often alone with their two children, a 3-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son.

Garcia doesn't feel comfortable letting her son walk alone around their neighborhood of mobile homes off N.M. 14, even though it seems safe. Usually her daughter is with her, so it's tricky to find an activity both children would enjoy. The neighborhood playground is small, with just a couple of swings and nothing for a teenager.

"I think we all need some exercise in my family," Garcia said. "My mother has diabetes, and I don't want one of my kids to catch it. I want to prevent it. I want to get some help with that."

Wide-reaching crisis

Obesity has become epidemic in the state and the nation for both adults and children. Newspaper and magazine stories and radio and TV reports repeatedly remind us that one-third of Americans are obese — more than 20 percent over their ideal weight — and another third are overweight. Some 26 million people have Type 2 diabetes, and another 79 million are pre-diabetic. According to a four-part series that aired on National Public Radio earlier this year, today's children might become the first generation of Americans to live shorter lives than their parents, due to poor health.

Almost everyone has something to say about the problem or a partial remedy to suggest. A month and a half ago, New York mayor Michael Bloomberg proposed banning sales of supersized soft drinks. On June 20, the American Medical Association, the nation's largest physician group, adopted a policy in favor of taxing beverages with added sweeteners.

This spring, the Institute of Medicine, a nongovernmental organization whose mission is to advise the government on health issues, published a study saying that individuals alone can't reverse the obesity crisis. The study cited a need for environmental changes that would make it easier for Americans to make healthy choices where they work, learn, eat and play.

To that end, the New Mexico Department of Health is spending \$11 million — mostly federal money — over five years in 14 communities to reduce barriers to healthy lifestyle choices, according to Patty Morris, director of the state Office of Nutrition and Physical Activity. The department is encouraging communities to promote healthier habits among their residents — for instance, by establishing safe routes for children to walk to school and by cultivating community gardens.

“If we can change those environments, then we are creating a culture. It's very similar to tobacco — where healthy choice becomes dominant, or at least has an equal chance,” Morris said.

In New Mexico, poverty is one of the biggest challenges to good health. While most people face some barriers to maintaining good health — busy lifestyles, the wide availability and cheapness of unhealthy food and limited physical education in schools — poverty exacerbates the challenges that families face. And many of the state's communities are poor.

People who earn low incomes are less likely to have access to transportation, information about community resources, access to healthy food and money to pay for children's activities. Their children are more likely to live in unsafe neighborhoods, and many of them eat two out of three meals at school.

Locally, nongovernmental organizations are stepping up to address the issue. With \$70,000 from Wal-Mart, Blue Cross Blue Shield and the Frost Foundation, La Familia Medical Center hired Zoila Cleaver to run CENA (Comida, Ejercicio, Nutrición, Acción) — the pilot home-visiting program to help families develop healthy habits, which Garcia is participating in.

Jim Lutz, La Familia's medical director, said changing a family's diet and increasing children's activity levels have proven to be effective in controlling childhood obesity. On the other hand, “The reality is, kids don't become healthy without the family making a choice to do that,” Lutz said. “There isn't anything you can tell a child that's going to affect who buys the groceries and what's available to eat, and what's taken to school for lunch or snack, so you really have to address it at the level of the family.”

Decades ago, Morris said, it was unheard of for children to develop obesity-related diseases. Now, according to Lutz, La Familia is seeing an increase in the number of pediatric patients who have Type 2 diabetes.

Nutrition, fitness key to healthy weight

One of the barriers CENA's participant families face is a lack of knowledge about healthy foods. To demonstrate possibilities, at one of the program's bimonthly tasting sessions, Cleaver made a pasta sauce using yogurt instead of cream. Another time, families tried asparagus in a stir fry for the first time.

Cleaver said she's learned that her immigrant client families have become exposed to an array of food products that are new to them, and they are often confused by marketing tactics that label processed foods as "healthy." At one house Cleaver visited, a girl said the only vegetable she likes is frozen broccoli and cheese, a packaged product that contains a lot of fats and chemicals.

On the more positive side, "Most of these families cook quite a bit," Cleaver said. "It seems they get in trouble when they get away from their traditional foods, or when the kids are in charge of cooking because their parents aren't home."

Since the CENA program started in February, Cleaver has discovered that families can easily give up sugared drinks, especially after she demonstrates the sugar content in sodas and juices by putting spoonfuls of sugar into a measuring cup. What's harder is incorporating more vegetables into their meals.

"None of the families eat even close to the recommended daily serving," she said. "They don't know how."

Lacking information about cooking or healthy foods is a barrier people of all economic levels may face, said Lynn Walters, executive director of Cooking with Kids in Santa Fe. If people are told to eat vegetables, she said, but they haven't tasted them and don't know how to cook them, why would they bother?

"If you have skills, if you know how to use a knife in a safe, effective manner, and you understand how heat works, there is so much you can do," she said. "People talk about education opening up doors. Having cooking skills really opens up your world."

Garcia herself doesn't remember eating many vegetables as a child. Her mother, also a Santa Fe native, often cooked red chile with meat and beans. She said she learned to cook on her own and started her married life 15 years ago by frying most of her food.

Garcia learned about portion sizes from a La Familia nutritionist a few years ago. She made some key changes: eliminating sodas and juices, baking or grilling instead of frying and switching from white tortillas to whole wheat. She also had her son cut back on the hours of television and video games he played.

Along with learning healthier eating habits through CENA, Garcia is taking advantage of a \$1,000 scholarship fund Cleaver set up at the Genoveva Chavez Community Center for families in the program. Garcia walks around the track with her daughter while her son gets a workout on the fitness equipment.

The family has two vehicles now, she said, so she can take her son to an activity when her husband is at work. Her son loves his new boxing classes, which are partially paid for by La Familia's grant. Garcia said she wouldn't be able to afford the classes without the financial help.

"I've been knowing that we have to get out and move," she said. "I've known that for two years, but something always stops me. Right now, I'm trying to get it right. We have to go and do something every day."

Cleaver is hopeful that people will maintain healthy habits once they start seeing positive changes. The program focuses on small, attainable goals such as walking 20 minutes a day after dinner.

"I feel like there is the possibility to create lasting change even in small ways — getting them to eat more vegetables, exercise more and drink more water," she said.

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