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Campaigns Launched To Move Californians From Fat to Fit

Californians are overweight, out of shape and getting that way earlier in life, according to a study released this month.

Even before the California Health Interview Survey was released by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, California health and government officials were responding to what some call a "crisis of growing proportions" by launching campaigns to turn fat to fit.

Here's a quick overview of the breadth of efforts under way:

- Anthem Blue Cross and the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports joined forces for a 15-week statewide mobile outreach campaign to encourage children to exercise and think about healthy choices.
- San Jose City Council members are considering a one-year citywide moratorium on new fast-food restaurants, following the model of a similar moratorium approved last month in south Los Angeles. Civic leaders argue that fast food contributes to people -- especially kids -- becoming overweight. In San Jose, the proposed moratorium would also ban new fast-food restaurants within 1,000 feet of schools.
- Health activists in San Mateo County launched two anti-obesity Web sites last week -- one aimed at parents and educators and one aimed at kids.
- Sen. Alex Padilla (D-Los Angeles) authored a bill that would require restaurant chains with 20 or more outlets to post calorie information on menu boards statewide. A similar proposition is under consideration in Los Angeles County.
- The California Medical Association Foundation has launched a campaign -- the Obesity Prevention Project -- to give physicians access to and assistance with education, advocacy and resources to help patients deal with and avoid obesity.

Other county and statewide efforts are also in the works.

Banking on Star Power

Blue Cross and the governor's office are hoping the pulling power and persuasiveness of celebrity athletes can help turn the tide for California's young people. NFL star Jerry Rice, Olympic gold medal winner Misty May-Treanor and several other athletes will participate in the 15-week traveling Anthem Blue Cross Live Like a Champion Tour.

The tour will visit YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs and after-school programs in 10 cities throughout California. The tour is focusing on reaching out to the state's underserved communities.

"As the state's largest health insurance provider, Anthem Blue Cross recognizes its responsibility to respond to the growing epidemic of childhood obesity," Leslie Margolin, president of Anthem Blue Cross, said in a prepared statement. "We are committed to addressing the issue and empowering families and communities to adopt healthier lifestyles."

The company's director of clinical programs, Harvinder Sareen, said instilling healthy habits early is important.

"Encouraging healthy eating and activity routines is a great strategy to help children stay healthy," Sareen said. "Research shows regular physical activity during childhood and adolescence helps build healthier bones and muscles and increases self-esteem," Sareen added.

The tour features a variety of games and activities highlighting accomplishments and encouragements of athletes. Kids can participate in soccer, volleyball, football, basketball, snow boarding, surfing and skateboarding activities all focused on good nutrition as well as exercise.

Some Call Trend Toward Obesity 'Epidemic'

According to CDC, the childhood obesity rate has more than tripled in the United States over the past three decades for children six to 11 years old. For kids ages two to five, the rate has more than doubled. Those kinds of numbers qualify as "epidemic" proportions, according to some health officials.

In California, one in three school-age children is overweight or obese and even more -- almost 40% -- are physically unfit, according to the California Health and Human Services Agency.

Although much attention and effort is directed at childhood obesity, kids aren't the only ones affected by obesity.

According to the California Health Interview Survey released last week, more than half the adults in California are overweight or obese. The 56% overweight or obese figure didn't particularly surprise researchers, but two related figures did:

- Only about one third of adults who saw a health care provider in the past 12 months discussed exercise and only 28% discussed nutrition with their health professional.
- One third of the adults interviewed did not exercise moderately or vigorously in the previous seven days.

"That one really surprised me," said Sue Holtby, senior research scientist at the Public Health Institute, which conducted the California Health Interview Survey in conjunction with the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

"Our thresholds were pretty low for moderate exercise, but a full one-third of the people we talked to said they didn't walk anywhere, ride a bike, go swimming ... anything. That's pretty amazing," Holtby said.

"It doesn't take much to turn that around," Holtby added. "People think, 'Oh, I can't go to the gym' or 'I don't want to go running,' but really all it takes is 10 to 15 minutes of moderate activity to make a difference. Instead of taking the elevator, take the stairs. Instead of jumping in the car to drive to the store or drive the kids to school, walk. It would be good for the kids and their parents."

Two Factors Blamed for Lack of Dialogue: Time, Money

Holtby said the low percentage of patients discussing exercise and nutrition with doctors is probably attributable to two factors. Holtby explained, "I think when a patient comes in for a certain reason -- a cold, or an injury or whatever -- the doctor is focusing on whatever the complaint is, not on the bigger picture."

"And I think the other factor is insurance companies do not pay for time spent on patient education," Holtby said. "It takes time to teach a diabetic patient how to manage the disease. Unless you're in Kaiser or some HMO like it, you're not necessarily going to get reimbursed for time talking about exercising and good nutrition."

More on the Web:

- [**California Health Interview Survey**](#)
- [**CMA Foundation Obesity Prevention Project**](#)

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