

Weight of our state: 14th fattest

Annual report finds N.C. adding pounds; state has diet, exercise plan

Jean P. Fisher, Staff Writer

A national report Tuesday fingered North Carolina as one of 31 states where residents are getting rounder -- the same day state officials launched an ambitious but unfunded new strategy to turn the tide.

Nearly 26 percent of the state's adults weighed in as obese in 2005, up almost a full percentage point, according to new numbers reported Tuesday. An additional 37 percent of adults were overweight.

Put it all together, and the state is the nation's 14th fattest, according to "F as in Fat," an annual report on the thickening American waistline released by Trust for America's Health, a Washington-based health advocacy group.

Mississippi won the dubious honor as the nation's fattest, with nearly 31 percent of residents qualifying as obese and more than 36 percent overweight. The leanest state was Colorado, where nearly 18 percent of residents are obese and almost 37 percent are overweight. North Carolina had the eighth-highest rate of Type 2 diabetes -- a condition tied to weight and inactivity -- with 8.3 percent of adults diagnosed with the disease.

Public health officials in North Carolina greeted the grim news by announcing a new five-year plan to fight obesity and related diseases. People are considered obese if they have a body mass index greater than 30 -- roughly more than 20 percent heavier than the maximum healthy weight recommended for a

UNHEALTHY NORTH CAROLINA

Adults who are obese or overweight, 2005: 62.6%

Children who are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight, 2005: 30%

Adults who get the minimum recommended amount of physical activity*, 2005: 37.7%

Children who get the minimum physical activity, 2005: 54%

Adults who get no exercise, 2005: 22.4%

Data not available for children

*Minimum requirement = 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, such as walking, five or more days a week, or 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity, such as running, three or more days a week.

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height and frame. The Eat Smart, Move More plan builds on existing state and local programs that teach healthy ways, said Sheree Vodicka of the state Division of Public Health's physical activity and nutrition branch. The plan does not come with any state money to implement it, nor is there a lead agency to develop programs or coordinate local efforts.

"It's designed to be a plan that anyone can really pick up and run with," Vodicka said. She was among the public health and medical experts who wrote the obesity plan, presented Tuesday at a Raleigh summit attended by health officials and representatives from business, schools, health insurers, nonprofits and community groups.

Vodicka said organizations that want to develop programs can seek funding from foundations or apply to the state, which supports several obesity prevention initiatives with a federal grant that provides more than \$2 million in funding annually.

Barry Popkin, a UNC-Chapel Hill researcher and obesity expert, said North Carolina's new obesity plan reflects the lack of funding to support meaningful change.

"These are very thoughtful recommendations from people who don't have any resources," said Popkin, who reviewed Eat Smart, Move More at The News & Observer's request. "It's all nice stuff. But there's no teeth in what they say."

State sets goals

The state's plan does for the first time provide specific goals for county public health clinics, schools, work sites, churches and other groups addressing the problem.

One objective is to cut by 25 percent the number of children who eat fast food three or more times a week. Another aims to boost the percentage of North Carolinians who prepare

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* To learn more about the state's plans to fight obesity and related illnesses, visit www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com.

* To view information on North Carolinians' health status, by county or statewide, visit www.schs.state.nc.us/SCHS/brfss/2005/index.html.

* To read the national report, "F as in Fat", visit www.healthyamericans.org.

* To calculate your body mass index, or BMI, and learn whether you are overweight or obese, have an accurate measure of your weight and height ready and visit www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/index.htm.



and eat their main meal at home to at least 70 percent. Home-cooked meals are typically lower in fat, calories, sugar and salt. After five years, public health officials want obesity levels to have leveled off.

That's a lofty objective, considering that the percentage of North Carolinians carrying extra pounds has risen steadily for two decades.

"We didn't want to say that we should see a decrease, because that would be unrealistic," Vodicka said.

Excess weight increases the risk of high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, osteoarthritis and other medical problems. There is also a link between fat and breast and colon cancers.

Fat-related health problems ring up a formidable tab. Economists at RTI International in Research Triangle Park estimated in 2004 that the state spends \$2.1 billion a year on obesity and related illness.

Bringing about change

Many community groups already offer classes that preach the value of healthy diet and exercise.

Kay Greer of Clayton enrolled her 8-year-old daughter, Amber, in a program at WakeMed in Raleigh after Amber's pediatrician raised concerns about her weight and high cholesterol. Since July, Amber has attended sessions three times a week to learn the basics of healthy eating and to work up a sweat playing fitness and agility games with other children.

The point of the program, called "Energize," is to prevent children from developing Type 2 diabetes, which can cause heart disease, kidney failure and blindness. Parents must attend sessions about healthy eating to ensure children have proper support at home.

Greer said she has been inspired to change the entire family's diet. She has cut back on fast food, which the family used to eat as often as twice a week, chucked sugary snacks and drinks, and introduced more fresh fruits and vegetables.

Authors of Eat Smart, Move More hope the plan will inspire similar community programs that help families make lifestyle changes. The state will monitor progress through annual telephone surveys of residents' health and habits.

The problem might be even more vast than we think.

"F as in Fat" bases its findings on the same telephone surveys the state will use to monitor results. The surveys ask people in each state to self-report their height and weight. Researchers know that many male respondents say they are taller than they actually are. And many women fib about their actual weight. That means we're probably even fatter than we've let on.

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