

WEIGHING IN

Cathy Schultz, a nutrition educator with NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service in Raton, is a poster child for a healthy lifestyle. But sitting in her small office in Colfax County's rustic courthouse, she admits with a shy laugh that it wasn't always so.

In the last decade, Schultz has found herself at various times divorced, jobless and homeless. On top of that, she says that she was tipping her bathroom scales at almost 300 pounds. "Slowly, quietly, I went proactive about a year ago," she says, starting with becoming a regular down at Fitness Zone, a spartan gym a few blocks from work.

"Then I started cutting my portions down to size and sticking to the Food (Guide) Pyramid. I've lost about 70 pounds, and I feel great." Last December, she got a great Christmas present: her own house.

Healthy lifestyle

But Schultz is fighting a trend that is going the other way for far too many New Mexicans. According to the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention, 57 percent of New Mexico adults are overweight or obese, and the obesity rate increased by 100 percent between 1990 and 2002.

The story for young people isn't any brighter: 26 percent of New Mexico high school students are considered overweight or at risk of becoming overweight, while 22 percent of low-income children 2 to 5 are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

Some health experts suggest that if today's youth keep supersizing meals while downsizing physical activity, they risk becoming the first generation of Americans to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents' because of obesity-related heart disease and diabetes.

Fast food frenzy

Carrying extra weight vastly increases the risk of serious medical problems such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke and arthritis. "Obesity and diabetes go hand in hand," says Drey Fisher, developer of an eight-week class called "Health and Fitness for the Diabetic" at Santa Fe Community



Tipping point: Nine-year-old Samantha Hand of Las Cruces knows it's important to balance treats like ice cream with a healthy diet that emphasizes whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

College. According to the American Diabetes Association, 15.7 million people nationwide have diabetes, and of that number 90 to 95 percent have Type 2, once known as adult-onset diabetes. "For the first time ever, we're seeing Type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents," Fisher says.

A contributing factor in New Mexico is consumption of super-sized fast foods, he says. Last year's new Thickburger, which contained 1,420 calories and 107 grams of fat, led comedian Jay Leno to joke that

WARGLE

BY NORMAN MARTIN

the megaburger “actually comes in a little cardboard box shaped like a coffin.”

Dining out used to be a treat, but now many New Mexicans eat out almost every day, and all those treats add up. Not only is fast food loaded with fats and processed sugars—both of which spell trouble for even the

healthiest body—but Americans are eating larger portions than ever.

“It boils down to calories, and fast food is calorie dense,” says Linda Cryer, a dietitian with the state Department of Health’s Obesity Prevention Program. “You have to make good health choices in the food you eat.”

Battling the bulge

Gov. Bill Richardson believes New Mexico’s kids should be getting less junk food and more physical education at school. “Youth obesity is a crisis in New Mexico,” he says. Richardson proposed a fee on vending machine providers in schools—\$250 in elementary schools, \$500 in middle schools and \$750 in high schools—to raise about \$4 million for children’s health. The healthier that providers’ offerings were, the less they’d have to pay, according to his plan.

In addition, the Governor’s Council on Physical Fitness and Health has adopted recommendations for daily physical education and nutrition standards in New Mexico’s public schools. Currently,

one year of physical education is required in middle school and in high school; elementary schools integrate it into other subjects. According to the University of New Mexico’s Prevention Research Center, surveys show only 23.2 percent of New Mexico high school students were physically active most days of the week, compared to 25.5 percent nationally.

Several high-profile groups, including the American Heart Association, American Diabetes Association and American Cancer Society, have also launched anti-obesity drives in New Mexico. “Kids who are physically active perform better socially and academically,” says Mary Jayne Johnson, chairwoman of the New Mexico Coalition To Promote Physical Activity and Nutrition.

Healthier kids

Plenty of other groups are putting their shoulder to the wheel to help New Mexicans shape up, but there’s an especially intense effort to target young people. Nationally there’s Action for Healthy Kids, a public-





Home stretch: Aaron Martinez, 10, finds that the stretching exercises taught in NMSU's Fit Families classes at Sierra Middle School increase his range of motion. The six-week program focuses on healthy lifestyles and better nutrition.

private initiative that is organizing teams in all 50 states to work with schools to improve youth fitness and eating habits.

"Schools have the unique opportunity—even the responsibility—to teach and model healthful eating and physical activity, both in theory and in practice," says David Satcher, former U.S. Surgeon General and founding chair of Action for Healthy Kids.

According to the "Preventing Childhood Obesity" study issued by the Institute of Medicine last

October, few schools are following the recommendation by the American Academy of Pediatrics that physical education classes be provided daily for all students. It said daily PE exists nationwide at only 8 percent of U.S. elementary schools, 6.4 percent of middle schools and 5.8 percent of high schools.

"Schools cannot afford to act as if student health is somebody else's problem," says Gene Carter, executive director of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, an Alexandria,

Va.-based organization that represents 160,000 educators.

Here in New Mexico, NMSU's Extension Service led a school health training meeting last fall with more than 50 school representatives from 11 school districts across the state. As a result, the Albuquerque Public School District developed a toolkit on nutrition and physical activity guidelines.

As part of its mission, Extension offers nutrition classes and promotes healthy eating and exercise. The lessons are based on the dietary guidelines for Americans and the Food Guide Pyramid.

[A call to action](#)

One example of a positive program here in New Mexico is Fit Families, a six-week program for families with overweight children ages 3 to 17, says Martha Archuleta, an Extension food and nutrition specialist. The program is designed to help families achieve child weight management through better nutrition, increased physical activity and improved self-esteem, she says.

The free, family-based program, which launched last fall, is a joint effort among NMSU experts, Las Cruces health department officials and local pediatricians. With a pediatrician's referral, the child and at least one family member attend the weekly two-hour sessions at local neighborhood public schools. This year, four sessions will be held, including one in Spanish. Each class, which includes about 15 families, has classroom activities and outdoor physical fitness instruction.

"This isn't a weight loss program," Archuleta says. "The kids do sometimes lose weight, but the emphasis is on healthy lifestyles and improved self-esteem. We've had extremely positive feedback from the families."



Walk the walk: Bill and Susie Tufts take a leisurely stroll across the NMSU campus with their daughter, Julie. Experts say people should exercise at least 30 minutes daily to cut the risk of chronic disease. To prevent weight gain, they need 60 minutes of exercise, and to maintain weight loss, 60 to 90 minutes.

To address the needs of middle-aged and older women, NMSU experts began a new program this winter in Los Alamos called StrongWomen. The 12-week curriculum centers on a series of strength training exercises to improve muscle mass, balance and bone density. “The response has been phenomenal,” says Paula Roybal Sanchez, an NMSU Extension home economist. “We’ve seen mental and emotional benefits, in addition to across-the-board increased energy levels.”

In a move to specifically focus on weight and health problems for Hispanics, NMSU and the U.S. Department of Agriculture will unveil a series of 63 radio spots in Spanish this summer addressing children’s weight issues. El Regalo de Salud or The Gift of Health, helps Spanish-speaking parents aid their children in a compassionate, healthy way. The spots are expected to be featured on more than 100 Hispanic radio network outlets nationwide.

Get up, get going

Genetics determine how susceptible people are to being overweight or obese. Genes influence how the body burns calories or stores fat. The factor that puts children at greatest risk of being overweight is having obese parents, says Stewart Agras, a professor emeritus at the

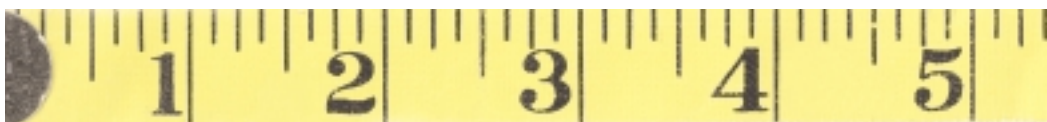
Stanford University School of Medicine. That connection is likely due to a combination of genetics and family influences, he says.

The National Institutes of Health has reported that overweight adolescents have a 70 percent chance of becoming overweight or obese adults, which raises the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke.

Still, the daily choices a person makes in eating and physical activity count. According to CDC research, almost half of New Mexicans didn’t meet the recommended guidelines for moderate physical activity in 2003. Seventy-one percent failed to exercise vigorously.

“We need a balance of aerobic, strength and flexibility training,” says Bruce Jacobs, Extension health specialist. “People need to be encouraged to be active doing things that they like.”

Kari Bachman, an Extension nutrition program coordinator, says to remember the good example of Raton’s Cathy Schultz. “People of any size—at almost any point in their life—can be healthy and take positive steps toward a healthy lifestyle.” **R**



Tale of the Tape

- 57 percent of New Mexico adults are overweight or obese.
- 17 percent of non-Hispanic white adults and 22 percent of Hispanic adults in New Mexico are obese.
- The obesity rate among New Mexico adults increased by 100 percent between 1990 and 2002.
- 26 percent of New Mexico high school students are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.
- 22 percent of low-income children between 2 and 5 years of age in New Mexico are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention