

Idaho Falls Post Register, Thursday, June 26, 2008 – by Kim Noteboom (2 pages)

EIRMC: Child obesity an issue

The hospital held a news conference to talk about its effects on the community and what can be done about it.

Idaho Falls isn't immune to a problem afflicting the rest of the country: childhood obesity. In fact, childhood obesity has become so pervasive that Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center held a news conference Wednesday to talk about its impact on the community.

Nationally, as many as 30 percent of children are obese, said Craig Denny, a physician at the Behavioral Health Center who specializes in child psychiatry. "So essentially, it's an epidemic," he said. Denny said he has seen a correlation between obesity and self-esteem and depression problems.

Also, health professionals are seeing children develop Type II Diabetes, a disease that is usually found in people older than 40, and at least one cardiovascular risk factor such as high cholesterol or blood pressure. "In my opinion, (children) are eating themselves to death," Denny said.

In order to help combat childhood obesity, Denny recommends that parents become aware of what their children are eating and how many calories they are consuming.

Parents should also meet with a dietician at their pediatrician's office to come up with a healthy way for their kids to lose weight. Although watching a child's calorie intake is one way to deal with obesity, EIRMC has decided to look at the problem as a whole.

As Idaho Falls has grown, it has become more difficult to walk or bicycle, registered nurse and diabetes educator Stephanie Rose said. In response to this, EIRMC is sending out a challenge for businesses to sponsor a crosswalk as part of Idaho Falls Community Pathways.

So far, four pathways have been developed, and each one has orange flags for pedestrians to use as they are crossing the roadway. EIRMC also has taken on an adolescent pilot program that teaches children and their families how to shop for healthy food, eat appropriate portion sizes and read food labels.

Part of the obesity problem, Rose said, is that a lot of kids are raising themselves. "A family is not a democracy," she said. "A parent needs to guide that child. We should insist our kids eat nutritionally healthy foods."

Rose also suggests that parents facilitate physical activities for their children, such as mowing the lawn or washing windows. She also said families need to support physical activity and push their children to be more active.

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Changing family behaviors

Many behaviors contribute to childhood obesity, and these habits are hard to change within a family. Therefore, taking small steps at first can help a family ease into healthier habits. Here are some helpful hints:

It's not a race. The first rule of change is not to make changes too quickly. Think small. For example, turn off the TV during dinner, switch from soda pop to milk or water, and take a walk after dinner a few times a week.

Set individual and family goals. Goals need to be achievable and measurable. Set specific goals for each family member, and then determine family goals.