

Twin Falls Times News, Thursday, Nov. 11, 2010 – by Amy Huddleston

Too many are obese in Idaho

Idaho's adult population is heavier than ever. More than half of Idaho adults are overweight and a quarter of them are obese, according to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. That's a lot of people — 100,000 more Idahoans than the population of Ada County.

And even with the multitude of studies produced on obesity, its hold is strengthening and predicted to include 43.2 percent of Idaho's adults in 2018, according to America's Health Rankings, an annual report of U.S. health statistics. Obesity is defined as a body mass index of 30 or higher. If that's not enough to encourage more Idahoans to trade a handful of cookies for a short jog around the neighborhood, health experts are increasingly examining the economics of obesity.

Obesity-related diseases cost an estimated \$147 billion a year in the U.S. and around \$324 million in Idaho, according to America's Health Rankings. Those costs are predicted to rise significantly as people struggle with diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnea and cancer, among other obesity-related issues.

"People don't know how to feel hunger anymore and some people can't tell when they are full," said Jamie Tigue, assistant professor of physical education at the College of Southern Idaho. "We are eating off of platters now. If you go buy plates they will be 14 inches. A normal plate is only 9 inches."

Tigue teaches a class during the spring semester called "Lose Big, Win Big." It's a motivational class for those who want to lose weight, and combines exercise and nutritional information, facets Tigue describes as like a lock and key. Most of her students join the class after having what she calls an "ah-ha moment." Often a heart attack, developing diabetes or high blood pressure leads to rethinking lifestyle choices.

Idaho's obesity rate has jumped 6 percent over the last decade and 4.2 percent in south-central Idaho, according to Health and Welfare statistics. The Trust for America's Health, a nonprofit dedicated to disease prevention, released a report this year ranking Idaho 36th in the nation in fitness, and noting an increase in obesity rates in 28 states in the past year. "Obesity is one of the biggest public health challenges the country has ever faced, and troubling disparities exist based on race, ethnicity, region, and income," said Jeffrey Levi, Ph.D., executive director of TFAH. "This report shows that the country has taken bold steps to address the obesity crisis in recent years, but the nation's response has yet to fully match the magnitude of the problem. Millions of Americans still face barriers — like the high cost of healthy foods and lack of access to safe places to be physically active — that make healthy choices challenging."

Tigue said she encourages rewards in her class when people start to lose weight. But instead of the standard incentive of food, she tells her students to buy a new pair of running shoes or a new shirt. She said parents and schools need to start rewarding children with activities or a trip to the park instead of a sugary confection so they can learn early on that food is not a reward. "It's a vicious cycle and we're already having trouble with health care. I don't know how America is going to do it," Tigue said, adding that people need to find their motivation to get moving. "Boredom is the worst thing. Find something that excites you and keep trying new things until you find something you love."