More than half of Hawaii adults are overweight, but others, such as Paul Niibu, an installer for Oceanic Time Warner Cable, have done something about it. After weighing 240 pounds six years ago, he is down to 171, thanks to diet and exercise. Spotting for him is Jenn Corley, healthy lifestyles coordinator for the YMCA in Mililani.

PHOTO BY TINA YUEN, PBN

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Hawaii has weight problem, and it’s getting worse

Ivy Shintani, program coordinator at the University of Hawaii’s Pacific Health Research and Education Center.

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More than half of Hawaii’s adults are overweight or obese and health experts say it could get worse unless they change their exercise and eating habits.

Obesity is a nationwide problem and is not unique to Hawaii, said Dr. Virginia Pressler, executive vice president and chief strategic officer for Hawaii Pacific Health.

In fact, Hawaii is considered to be the second-healthiest state behind Vermont in terms of obesity levels, according to a 2012 report from the United Health Foundation.

Incidence in Hawaii is lower than the national average but our adult obesity rates have doubled in the past 15 years and today one in three of our children are obese," Pressler said. "Even though we’re better overall, our rate of increase is going up just as fast — it’s a frightening epidemic."

Obesity often leads to chronic diseases such as diabetes, kidney failure, blindness, heart disease and cancer. Those extra pounds are costing the U.S. about $190.2 billion each year, according to a report by the Institute of Medicine titled "Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention."

University of Hawaii President M.R.C. Greenwood, who served on the committee that produced the report, said a major problem is that it’s cheaper to buy a bad diet than it is to buy a good diet in the U.S. "It has taken us decades to develop the epidemic of obesity we currently have," she said. It was an incremental change over a long period of time influenced by genetic predisposition in some cases, but mostly as a consequence of changes in the way we lead our lives — changes in what we eat and how much time we spend active.

Greenwood and Pressler noted that society as a whole is less active today, even in Hawaii, which is blessed with year-round warm weather. Pressler said technology and safety concerns are to blame for the inactivity. "There are a lot of reasons why people aren’t active, one being a lack of safe places to walk or bike," she said. "And technology continues to move us towards a lifestyle where we don’t have to do it, but our bodies are meant to move... Eventually you will get stiff, lose muscle mass and be less able to move around as it becomes more difficult."

In Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders especially, the rate of obesity and early onset of diabetes is increasing and moving into younger age groups, Greenwood said. "Once you start seeing children who have lifestyles then it shouldn’t be surprising if for everybody if you can figure out how to keep the most difficult population slim."

Shintani studied their nutrition and began putting their patients on diets rich in carbohydrates. "No-carb" diet fads are a fallacy, he said, and foods such as poi, rice, apples and sweet potatoes are impossible to gain weight from. "It would take eating a pound of poi to provide a day’s worth of calories, almost five pounds of brown rice, nine pounds of apples and many pounds of sweet potatoes," he said.

In order to slow the nation’s weight gain, Pressler, Greenwood and Shintani agree that it will require a multilayered approach involving both cultural and environmental changes. Government has a role in treating the epidemic, they say, from educating the public, creating legislation that discourages unhealthy eating to supporting more active community parks and programs.

"We work so much on getting a better health system, but what we really need is better health," Shintani said. "If you get better health, health-care costs go down."

Shintani and Greenwood have been working with Oceanic periodically puts on health fairs to assess glucose, blood pressure and body fat, giving employees a baseline to determine how healthy they are. Oceanic also conducted brown-bag sessions a year across campus and ways to prepare healthy meals. It held another weight-loss challenge in 2011 and plans to hold another one soon, Taira said.

Employers can play an important role in keeping their employees healthy, which can lead to happier, more-productive workers and lower health-care costs.

"Our philosophy is that we want to keep our employees healthy," she said. "That way, they will come to work and be happier employees."

In 2006, the company started its first weight-loss challenge, similar to "The Biggest Loser" TV series. To motivate staff, it started a money pool as a financial incentive. Employees contributed money and the company matched funds.

That year, a total of 106 employees participated in teams of between five and nine members. As a group, they shed a total of 406 pounds, an YMCA of Honolulu official said.

In 2008, the company started its second weight-loss challenge, similar to "The Biggest Loser" TV series. To motivate staff, it started a money pool as a financial incentive. Employees contributed money and the company matched funds.

That year, a total of 106 employees participated in teams of between five and nine members. As a group, they shed a total of 406 pounds, an YMCA of Honolulu official said.

In 2011, the company started its third weight-loss challenge, similar to "The Biggest Loser" TV series. To motivate staff, it started a money pool as a financial incentive. Employees contributed money and the company matched funds.

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