

Health & Wellness

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A weighty issue



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 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

Over half of adults are overweight and one in three keiki are obese

BY JENNA BLAKELY

jblakely@bizjournals.com | 955-8056

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.



Pressler

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 move 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 Is-

landers 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 diabetes and are overweight you know they are in for a lifetime of medical complications," she said. "If it were anything other than obesity then we would be in a national panic, but because it's seen by many as a choice and not a disease, people question whether or not we should be putting money into changing it. The reality is that it's one of our biggest health problems and now that we're seeing it in our younger generations, health-care costs will be enormous."

Another problem is that many people are misinformed about healthy eating, said Dr. Terry Shintani, president of the Hawaii Health Foundation and professor at the UH John A. Burns School of Medicine.



Shintani

Shintani, well-known for pioneering the "Eat More, Weigh Less" diet, began working with Native Hawaiians in the 1980s, at which point they were considered to be the nation's unhealthiest population sector, he said.

"There's a temptation to blame obesity in the Hawaiian population on genetics,

but back in the time when genes were true, there was almost no obesity back then," he said. "If you can figure out why this population — who has a great genetic tendency to become obese — never did get obese in ancient times, then it should be easy for everybody if you can figure out how to keep the most difficult population slim."

Shintani studied their nutrition and began putting his 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 eight pounds 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 multipronged 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 events, 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."

Here's what one company is doing to help its employees lose



TINA YUEN PHN

Paul Niibu, an installer for Oceanic Time Warner Cable, shows an ID photo of himself when he weighed about 240 pounds. He is now down to 171 pounds.

BY JENNA BLAKELY

jblakely@bizjournals.com | 955-8056

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

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Ruby Hayasaka's road to fitness.

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Oceanic Time Warner Cable is among the local companies taking a stand against today's obesity epidemic. Marcia Taira, director of human resources, said it offers several options for its employees to promote exercise and healthy eating.

"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 2008, 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 1,646 pounds, an average of more than 15 pounds. The winning team contributed 13 percent of the total weight loss and each winner walked away with \$800.

The problem was that some employees had trouble keeping the weight off after the competition ended.

"People really enjoyed the challenge, but then they would gain weight back,"

How employers can help employees get healthier

- Create guidelines for what food and beverages are acceptable in the workplace.
- Have a company dietitian on hand to discuss healthy eating.
- Hold employee seminars to inform them of available benefits and programs.
- Offer and encourage flexible scheduling to give employees reasonable time to exercise.

Taira said. "The missing piece was the maintenance of the weight loss."

The solution: a business partnership with the YMCA of Honolulu in which Oceanic employees were offered discounted memberships. This past year, the company added another component by offering YMCA fitness classes in the workplace.

"The Y sends instructors," Taira said. "We have Zumba twice a week and yoga once a week."

About 30 to 35 employees take advantage of the onsite classes and Taira said the feedback has been positive. The convenience has prompted people to attend, eliminating the common excuse of having no time to make it to the gym.

Other companies can form similar partnerships with the YMCA of Honolulu, according to Mike Doss, the Y's executive vice president and chief operating officer. He said the Y launched a corporate membership program about a year ago, specifically targeting employers. It's a three-fold partnership between the Y, an employer and its employees to offer discounted rates.

"Employers that decide to partici-

pate have access to all of our nine branches, seven of which are considered fitness branches," Doss said. "They have access to our equipment, group classes and swimming pools. We're hoping that as employees utilize the Y on a regular basis they become healthier, employer health-care costs will go down and employees will be absent from work fewer times."

Eleven companies currently participate in the program. But a common problem Doss hears from employees is lack of time.

"Employees have a hard time prioritizing," he said. "It's a matter of putting time to work out on their schedule somewhere in the day, which is not always easy when you got a full-time job and a family to take care of. But this is something that's very important and has long-term implications for themselves and their families."

Employers who offer flexible scheduling need to emphasize that it is okay for employees to work out during the workday, Doss said. Many employees may feel guilty about taking advantage of flexible scheduling, so making it known that it is encouraged could help get employees up and moving.

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 to discuss healthy eating and ways to prepare healthy meals. It held another weight-loss challenge in 2011 and plans to hold another one soon, Taira said.