

Health Care System: A Powerful Force for Improving Eating and Activity Environments

Medical experts and advocates in clinical and community settings play an important role in improving eating and activity habits. In 2001, the Surgeon General stated that “left unabated, overweight and obesity could cause as much preventable death and disability as cigarette smoking.”¹ Health care providers helped to achieve significant reductions in tobacco and motor-vehicle related mortality through advocacy and education. Once again, their power and resources are needed to prevent physical inactivity and diet-related chronic diseases. Barriers to healthy eating and physical activity are numerous in communities with limited economic resources, putting community members at higher risk of disease.

The health care system can adopt prevention-oriented standards of practice, improve institutional environments to support healthy behaviors and take action to advance effective policies at local, state, and national levels.

1. Health care providers play a valuable role in influencing patient behavior.

Pediatric and adult health care providers influence and reinforce patient dietary and physical activity patterns and lifestyle choices. Poor diet and inactivity generally do not present immediate symptoms, but put patients at risk for future disease. Therefore it is important to inquire about and cultivate healthy eating and activity habits in young patients and adults who appear healthy. For patients already experiencing symptoms of chronic disease, provider recommendations should steer patients towards making healthier choices and controlling their symptoms.

- In a national sample of internists, only 15% counseled inactive patients for at least five minutes during a routine office visit, despite best-practice guidelines stating that all inactive patients should be counseled.²
- Data from adult patient surveys indicate that patients are more likely to report positive dietary changes when their physicians ask them about diet.³
- Studies have found that babies who breastfeed are less likely to become overweight later in life.⁴

Actions:

- Adopt standards of practice that include routine screening of all patients regarding physical activity and eating behavior.
- Train providers to conduct culturally-competent screening and counseling.
- Acknowledge challenges to adopting healthy habits; develop referral systems to help patients access community resources.
- Encourage and support new mothers to breastfeed.

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STEERING COMMITTEE: The California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFit) ■ California Center for Public Health Advocacy ■ California Food Policy Advocates ■ California Pan Ethnic Health Network ■ California Park & Recreation Society ■ California Project LEAN ■ California WIC Association ■ Child Care Food Program Roundtable ■ Latino Health Access ■ Prevention Institute ■ Samuels & Associates, Inc ■ YMCA of the East Bay

2. Hospitals, clinics and other health care facilities should demonstrate model practices that support healthy eating and activity among clients and employees.

A survey of 47 US children's hospitals revealed that over 25% had fast food restaurants on site.⁵ Fast food in the lobby or vending machines filled with soft drinks and candy contradict the advice patients receive from health professionals. Closed stairwells and long periods sitting in waiting rooms do not promote activity. Adopting healthy eating and activity standards for clinics, hospitals and other facilities would improve the environment for patients and staff and, at the same time, set a positive example.

Actions:

- Make healthy foods available, such as in cafeterias, gift shops and vending machines. Through the efforts of one physician, Kaiser Permanente in Oakland now features a weekly farmers' market that serves staff and patients.
- Open stairwells and post signs to encourage their use and create an atmosphere that supports healthy behavior.
- Show movement videos or install exercise bikes and/or play areas in waiting rooms to provide opportunities for activity.
- Serve as role models. Health providers who "walk the talk" are better able to advocate healthy behaviors with their patients.

3. Health care providers offer credible leadership to advance public policy.

Policymakers and the public view physicians and other health professionals as the experts on matters pertaining to health. Health care professionals have been a noteworthy force in shifting the policy debate around major public health concerns. Similar efforts are needed to raise public awareness about the role of unhealthy food environments and poor community design as major barriers to physical activity and healthy eating.

- In 2003, 74% of respondents in a national poll reported that healthcare providers should play a major role in the fight against obesity.⁶
- According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "change is desperately needed in opportunities for physical activity in child care centers, schools, after-school programs, and other community settings. As leaders in their communities, pediatricians can be effective advocates for health- and fitness-promoting programs and policies."⁷

Actions:

- Contact public officials to highlight the need for community changes to improve eating and activity habits. Testify in support of legislation and local policies.
- Respond to news stories, providing a health care providers' perspective on the need for community changes to prevent nutrition and activity-related chronic disease.
- Encourage health plan coverage for prevention and wellness activities, including counseling, education, and access to weight-control and physical activity programs.
- Join/partner with the Strategic Alliance and local coalitions working to improve nutrition and physical activity environments.

CITATIONS

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