

Room for strides

Spokane's health district plans to fight obesity with 'walkable' city

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Spokane County is struggling with a ballooning waistline – a stubborn problem that health officials hope to remedy with a resolution of brisk walks along safe sidewalks and trails.

More than six out of every 10 people in the county are either overweight or obese. As bad as that may seem, the number of overweight people in Spokane County rests just above the Washington average, according to the state Department of Health.

The downside: Compared to Spokane, King County is skinny, with 52 percent of its population overweight.

The Spokane Regional Health District believes that Spokane can shed some of its collective girth and has enlisted the help of city and community planners to turn Spokane away from its car-loving reputation into a walkers' wonderland.

With a \$150,000 state grant, the health district and community planners hope to turn a handful of policy ideas into an initiative for neighborhood walking areas, complete with crosswalks and new sidewalks.

"We think we can design policies for a walkable sort of city," said Heleen Dewey, director of the district's physical activity and nutrition program.

There will be a focus on encouraging children to walk to school. About 22 percent of teens are overweight.

Dewey said policies can be adopted to give parents greater assurances that their children can safely walk to school rather than depend on buses or rides from parents and friends. Such policies include more crosswalks, more controlled intersections, and more school staff monitoring.

Walking policies can shake up sedentary lifestyles, according to the Active Living Network. If people have a place to walk within 10 minutes of their homes, the result can be 25 percent more people exercising.

That would be a healthy achievement for a county where 39 percent of residents report that they fall short of recommended exercise levels.

While Spokane grapples with community weight issues, the statistics are equally bad in the five counties of North Idaho, where the percentage of overweight people sits at 62 percent.

Health district spokeswoman Cynthia Taggart said the surprising detail behind that number is that 77.5 percent of men are overweight in North Idaho compared with 47.6 percent of women.

Taggart, along with Marilyn Sitaker, an epidemiologist with the Washington State Department of Health, cautioned that the numbers are self-reported through surveys.

"People tend to say they're a little taller than they really are and don't weigh as much as they probably do," Sitaker said. The final numbers include minor adjustments to account for the fudging of weights and heights.

Yet the overweight problems faced by Spokane are just part of the problem.

The county populace also smokes more than average, and has higher rates of asthma, diabetes and heart disease.