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ITCHMITE EPIDEMIC HITS LINCOLN

see page 7



Photo by Jim Kallisch, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Dept. of Entomology

Picking Up the Pace to Combat Childhood Obesity

Maureen Burson
Extension Educator

It seems like every time we turn on the radio or read a newspaper we hear about the obesity epidemic and the related quality-of-life and health-care costs.

The Institute of Medicine of the National Academies has developed a prevention-focused action plan outlined in a recent report, *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*. It notes, "Since the 1970s, the percentage of obesity has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2-5 and adolescents aged 12-19, and it has more than tripled for children aged 6-11 years."

According to Nebraska Health and Human Service System 2002/2003 *Overweight Among Nebraska Youth Report*, one in every three Nebraska students are either at risk for overweight or are overweight. This figure has doubled since 1990. In 2000, the personal and economic costs in Nebraska were approximately 1,900 deaths and \$700,000,000 in health care costs.

According to Kathy Karsting, R.N., and Health Services Coordinator of Lincoln Public Schools, "In the Lincoln Public Schools, we see the issues first hand. We are in a position to see or hear of disordered eating. The mental health issues of eating and body image can reach crisis dimensions. Meanwhile, current science informs us that being overweight is an epidemic among our children and is directly linked to premature death from cardiovascular disease and cancer."

Changing health behaviors requires changes in physical and social environments as well as the development and implementa-



The Nutrition Education Program kept youth moving at this year's 4-H Clover College. In this activity, youth circle around pictures of various foods until the music stops. Each participant then identifies a food item, its food group and how many servings of that food group are needed each day.

tion of policies and interventions. The challenge of improving students' eating patterns is a shared responsibility by schools, families, and communities. Schools can be the cornerstone of change and are most likely to be successful in improving students' eating patterns. Families are a vital part of the team and can promote physical activity and healthy eating. Other partners in change include: individuals, health care professionals, media, work sites, faith-based organizations and government agencies.

Local Efforts to Promote Good Health

There are many efforts in our local community to help youth develop healthy food choices and fitness habits to last a lifetime. Here are a few:

Lincoln Public Schools "Promoting Healthy Weight" Task Force — A task force formed to develop 4 to 8 recommendations for district policies, practices and standards to promote healthy weight. [See related article on page 12.] Contact: Kathy Karsting or Marybell Avery at 436-1000.

University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County Nutrition Education Program (NEP) — NEP offers several nutrition School Enrichment programs to qualifying schools and Early Head Start/Head Start centers. NEP staff compiled teacher curriculum and kits with hands-on activities which classrooms check out. More than 110 classrooms are registered for the 2004-05 school year. NEP also provides nutrition programs at a variety of community sites such as summer youth camps and teen residential treatment programs. Contact: NEP at 441-7180 or lancaster.unl.edu/nep.

Walking School Bus/Walk to School Day/Walk Your Child to School Week — Many local organizations sponsor this initiative to promote
see LOCAL EFFORTS on page 12

What Parents Can Do

Children become overweight for a variety of reasons. The most common causes are lack of physical activity and unhealthy eating patterns. In rare cases, a medical problem, such as an endocrine disorder, may cause a child to become overweight. A physician can perform an exam and some blood tests to rule out this type of problem.

The increasing popularity of television, computer and video games contributes to children's inactive lifestyles. The average American child spends approximately 24 hours each week watching television — time which could be spent in some sort of physical activity.

Combining healthy eating habits with regular physical activity is the most efficient



Use your imagination to present healthy foods in fun ways: half an apple, grapes, raisins and peanut butter can become a "ladybug"!

and healthful way to control weight.

Teach Your Family Healthy Eating Habits

The Center for Disease Control says, "For children the goal is not to lose weight, but rather to slow weight gain until height catches up." Here are some ideas to help you get started:

- Reduce the amount of fruit juice the child drinks. Many children drink juice instead of water, adding significantly to their daily calorie intake. Try to limit juice to no more than 3 or 4 ounces a day.
- Avoid or limit soda pop.
- Switch to skim milk if the child is over 2 years old.

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