Wanted: More Action Figures

Be honest: Is that New Year’s resolution to get more exercise starting to fade from memory?

Take heart, neighbors! Now is not the time to give up on exercise. In fact, as snow and ice melt and temperatures rise, our exercise options are expanding like a sedentary waistline. We can finally emerge from our winter caves to walk, hike, bicycle, garden and golf, just to name a few.

Getting (or staying) active is well worth shoehorning into our daily schedules. It can reduce our risk of obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and many cancers. It can strengthen our bones and muscles and improve our mental health. It can do so much to improve the quality – and even the span – of our lives.

Yet, too many people still struggle to squeeze exercise into their limited free time.

According to new estimates released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), from 10 to 43 percent of adults around the country are physically inactive. The percentage varies by region. Residents of the South and Appalachia are least likely to be physically active; those areas also tend to have high rates of diabetes and obesity. Residents of the West Coast, Colorado, Minnesota, and parts of the Northeast are most likely to be physically active.

As I’m sure you’ve noticed, Montana is not on either list. So on the one hand, good job, folks. On the other hand, we can still do better!

How do those of us living in Lewis and Clark County compare? The good news is we’re slightly more active than we were four years ago (18.6 percent inactive in 2008, the most recent year for which statistics are available, as compared to 19.9 percent in 2004). We appear to be moving (pun intended) in the right direction.

The bad news is that almost a fifth of us still qualify as couch potatoes, and our overall rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes are creeping upward. In 2008, 21.6 percent of county residents were considered obese and 6.8 percent had been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. That compares to 19.4 percent and 5.3 percent in 2004, respectively.

Our community infrastructure can contribute significantly to our level of physical activity and overall health. Studies show that – when people live close to grocery stores, recreation sites, shopping, schools, and work – they have healthier lifestyles and lower rates of obesity.
Physical activity does not have to mean high-impact workouts and weight-lifting at the health club. Those can be productive, but so can more simple and less strenuous forms of activity, like using our own two feet to get us where we need to go.

There’s a direct correlation between obesity and “incomplete streets” – which are those that lack sidewalks, crosswalks, bike paths, and safe routes to school and work. Incomplete streets encourage us to drive more and walk less. This trend is clearly demonstrated in national statistics: walking trips have decreased by 40 percent since 1977 and vehicle trips have increased by 90 percent.

Healthy communities provide residents with opportunities to incorporate physical activity into our daily lives.

Our local officials are committed to encouraging more physical activity. Last month, the city was awarded a $40,000 grant aimed at promoting the integration of physical activity into our daily lives in an effort to promote community health.

The Helena Parks and Recreation Department and the local health department teamed up to apply for the grant. The money will be used to increase access to recreational activities and support the development of safe bike and pedestrian routes to our parks. It also will fund an Action Institute at which community leaders will focus on policy strategies to promote physical activity and community health.

In late December, city commissioners passed a resolution encouraging the planning, design, construction, and maintenance of streets with the goal of making them “complete streets.”

In May, we’ll get a chance to put these principles into practice with “Switching Gears,” a month-long initiative to encourage all of us to use more active forms of transportation. You’ll hear more on that as the month approaches.

These initiatives encourage our community to become more pedestrian and bicycle friendly as well as more accessible to the elderly and those with disabilities.

And eventually they’ll make it easier for all of us to take the next step toward better health.

For more information on physical activity from CDC, visit http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/statistics/index.htm and click on “New County Level Estimates of Leisure-Time Physical Inactivity” under Features.

To learn more about preventing obesity and diabetes, visit the local health department Web site at http://www.co.lewis-clark.mt.us/departments/health/community-family-health-promotion/obesity-prevention.html. Or call the health department at 443-2584.

Melanie Reynolds is the Health Officer at the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department. The Health Department’s mission is to improve and protect the health of all
Lewis & Clark County residents.

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