

Alaskans getting fatter at an alarming rate

REPORT: Two-thirds of adults in the state have weight problems.

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Another report on obesity, more depressing news: The number of Alaskans joining the ranks of the overweight or obese has increased an average of about 1 percent a year since 1991, says a new analysis produced by the state Department of Health and Social Services.

Adult Alaskans with weight problems grew from 49 percent being above normal weight in 1991 to 66 percent in 2007.

The new state analysis gives details of some consequences of that weight gain:

- Obese adults are twice as likely as those with normal weight to be diagnosed with high blood pressure. More than a third of obese Alaskans get that diagnosis, versus 15 percent of normal-weight people.
- If you're obese, you are six times more likely to suffer from diabetes (other than the type pregnant women sometimes get) than normal-weight adults. Two percent of normal-weight Alaskans get diabetes compared with 13 percent of obese Alaskans.
- Obese Alaskans are twice as likely as normal-weight people to say their health is fair or poor instead of good or excellent.

The state used body mass indexes -- a calculation taking into account weight and height -- to determine whether people are considered normal weight, overweight or obese.

The report says some Alaskans are more likely to be overweight and obese than others. Among those with the highest levels of obesity are Alaska Natives, women with household incomes of \$15,000 or less and women who don't finish high school.

The only hopeful note for Alaska cited in the report is that the rate of students in the Anchorage School District who are overweight or obese has leveled off. The district collects height and weight measurements as part of its health screening, and the state has been monitoring the trends. The above-normal-weight percent peaked at 38 percent of students in 2002-2003, and by the 2007-2008 school year had dropped to 36 percent.

The state pulled information from a number of sources for its report, including an annual survey of about 2,500 people conducted by the Alaska Division of Public Health, cooperatively with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Obesity, with tobacco use, is considered the biggest, preventable cause of death and disability. The state makes a significant effort to get people to quit smoking and chewing tobacco, spending several million dollars a year from a fund created from a 1998 legal settlement and from tobacco taxes. But so far, there's only a small state program to combat the weight gain.

Should the state tax junk food? Or spend public money to educate people?

The state asked those questions in the 2005 annual health survey, and asked again in 2009. Four years ago, 30 percent went for a junk food tax, 55 percent said restaurants should offer nutrition information, and 79 percent supported a government-funded media campaign. Half to three-fourths also said vending machines, soda machines and fast foods should not be allowed in schools.

The 2009 results aren't back yet. But Karol Fink, state obesity prevention manager, suspects with the increased attention paid to obesity in the last few years, there will be more support.

"In 2005 there wasn't as much knowledge about obesity," she said. "The public has become pretty educated."

Meantime, former Gov. Sarah Palin's attempt to put nearly \$1 million in state money toward tackling childhood obesity didn't make it through the 2009 Legislature.

House Finance Committee co-chairman Rep. Mike Hawker of Anchorage said he wasn't convinced the money was needed. Money was available from the federal government instead, he said. The state eventually did get \$476,000 through the CDC -- less than Palin wanted, but enough to keep a small program going.

The administration's proposal for a million-dollar effort was to study trends in weight gain in the Mat-Su School District, in addition to the Anchorage School District, and to put together a comprehensive anti-obesity program such as exists for tobacco control.

Hawker said he thought the program amounted to using schoolchildren as "lab rats."

"They failed to convince me we need a long-term state program at a time when we're looking a declining state revenues," he said. "We'll see what they propose this year."

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