

Thinner wallets, fatter bellies

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How the bad economy is encouraging bad habits - and how health officials are fighting back

Fattening foods are cheaper and easier to find than healthier fare. People are working longer hours for less pay, taking second jobs to make up lost earnings, and struggling to maintain a gym membership - or all three. Worrying about work translates into wider waistlines, it turns out, mostly for people who are already overweight. Oh, and losing sleep, too? That'll add on the pounds, as well.

While it's giving a whole new meaning to the phrase "the weight of the recession," it has also presented doctors and health officials with an opportunity to remind people that healthy choices can be made in boom times and in bad times.

State and national health experts say it's too soon to tell if the anemic economy is boosting obesity. But healthcare providers and exercise experts are seeing changes they tie to tighter times, for better or worse. Whether people turn to fast food because it's what they can afford or skip exercise because they're starved for time, the result can be unhealthy weight gain.

"There certainly are dangers during these difficult economic times," John Auerbach, commissioner of the state Department of Public Health, said. "It becomes more challenging for people to try to eat the healthiest foods or exercise regularly. It is an issue we are concerned about."

For Jean Drew in Epsom, N.H., putting healthy food on the table for her family requires some ingenuity. Her daughter Rebecca, 10, is learning how to read nutrition labels in the grocery store to comply with prescriptions from a Children's Hospital Boston program she attends to achieve a healthier weight. Drew scours supermarkets and farm stands for savings on the fruits, vegetables, chicken, and fish she knows are better than less expensive macaroni and cheese.

But stretching the family food dollar got harder four months ago when Drew's husband, Scott, a truck driver, had his hours cut. She now works two part-time jobs, as a graphic artist and in retail, to pick up the slack.

To keep ahead of the food bill and teach Rebecca how food is grown, the family now picks raspberries at her grandparents' patch, some of which they trade for vegetables grown in friends' gardens. They also grow tomatoes and zucchini at her other grandmother's house, where they also share meals to save money.

Better nutrition is the goal of the food pantry at Boston Medical Center, believed to be the only one of its kind in the country. Dr. Caroline Apovian sees the economy's hand both in the hospital's busy food pantry and in her weight management clinic at the hospital. From 400 people a month last year, the pantry's patrons have soared to 7,000 per month this year. Many are obese, she said, owing to past reliance on cheap food high in fat and calories.

In her clinic she sees other barriers to achieving a healthy weight. Prescription obesity drugs are not covered by insurance, but patients got help with the more than \$100 a month price tag from pharmaceutical company coupons. When the economic downturn deepened last fall, drug makers pulled back some of their discount programs. At the same time, gym memberships are also moving out of reach for some of Apovian's patients.

About the Author

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