

Obesity continues to climb in Fox Valley; health officials seek new strategies

[Trent Tetzlaff](#), Appleton Post-Crescent

Published 10:15 a.m. CT Nov. 9, 2018



(Photo: Courtesy of Wisconsin Timber Rattlers)

NEENAH - Here's some sobering news: obesity continues unchecked in the Fox Valley.

Despite the efforts of health officials over the past few years to draw attention to the dangers of unhealthy eating habits and sedentary lifestyles, about 75 percent of Fox Valley adults are either overweight or obese, according to data that was collected between 2013 and 2017 and released today by officials with the Weight of the Fox Valley initiative.

The report also says 29 percent of Fox Valley youth have a body mass index that is considered overweight or obese.

The categories overweight and obese are defined by BMI statistics. Overweight means a BMI between 25 and 29.9 while obese is a BMI greater than 30. A normal BMI is anywhere between 18.5 and 24.9.

Weight of the Fox Valley said in an announcement Friday morning at a presentation in Neenah that the obesity numbers aren't improving, meaning change is needed within the program, which aims to educate the public on healthy choices.

"Weight is not just about willpower," said Mark Jenike, associate professor and nutritional anthropology expert at Lawrence University. "The culture of eating in our area is obesogenic, with the proliferation of foods that are high in fat and sugar, large portion sizes and the inclusion of food in so many everyday activities that do not directly involve eating. In order to shift the behaviors of people in our community, healthy choices need to be the easy and obvious choices."

At the pace Fox Valley residents are gaining weight, the report says 50 percent of area adults will be in the obese category by 2025. Currently, 44 percent of adults are considered obese.

Weight of the Fox Valley, a project launched in 2013 via a partnership between the United Way Fox Valley and various health and community-minded organizations, has set its sites on retooling its program as obesity numbers continue to grow.

"Weight of the Fox Valley, through its amazing partnerships, has demonstrated success toward creating a healthier community," said Sarah Wright, Weight of the Fox Valley program manager. "However, the current pace and intensity leave us challenged to bring about significant change in a time-frame that can turn the curve now."

"Weight of the Fox Valley is currently engaged in a re-visioning process with the goal of scaling up this work in order to create bigger, bolder, more sustainable change."

The program uses a system modeled after the Wisconsin nutrition, physical activity and obesity plan to teach healthy living, according to the group's report. Starting kids off on the right foot when it comes to healthy eating and physical activity habits is a major goal.

Peter Kelly, president and CEO of United Way Fox Cities, said the program can only be made stronger if capacity issues are fixed, something they are hoping to address in the re-visioning process. The program has one full-time employee managing it.

"To have a greater impact in the community, the program will need a higher dosage, as we like to say," Kelly said. "This is something we are hoping to work on during the re-visioning process."

The results of the Weight of the Fox Valley report were obtained through height and weight measurements performed by area health care professionals of more than 109,000 adults and 28,000 children from Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties, according to the report.

While the results are eye-opening, BMI may not always give the best representation, said Dr. Thomas Zoch, vice president of Care Management-Clinical for Ascension Wisconsin.

Zoch said people may have high BMIs because they are large athletes, but it can be deceiving because they have considerable muscle mass instead of fat, which isn't taken into consideration.

While the weight issue in the Fox Valley may seem irreparable, Zoch said small steps to weight loss can pay big dividends.

"Losing even a little weight can greatly improve heart and vascular health," he said.