Today on Across the Fence walking the walk with the weight management program that's focused on teenagers. We'll see how the program helps fight off obesity by teaching young people about the importance of exercise and good nutrition. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. With childhood obesity in this country at an all-time high, professionals at the University of Vermont have launched a unique pediatric weight management program. The program called “REWARD TEENS” has several components including professional oversight, high technology and a requirement that a parent be part of the program. To learn more we begin at the UVM Physical Activity and Wellness Center with this report from Across the Fence’s Keith Silva.

When Dr. Connie Tompkins says she’s going to ‘run’ a test in her lab … she really means it.

Connie Tompkins Ph.D./Assistant Professor of Exercise Physiology: “We did a VO2 Max test. We’re monitoring her heart rate and we’re also looking at oxygen consumption … so it gives us an idea of how long a person would be able to sustain exercise and we basically just increase the intensity over the time until they can’t go anymore [laughs].

For every test that measures the body in motion there is another test that studies the body at rest.

Tompkins: ‘the astronaut hood, that’s a resting metabolism test … this one we do thirty minutes where they just lie completely still as if they were just resting, not sleeping … we can look at that thirty minutes and figure out how many calories they burn a day if they were just completely sedentary.’

These exercises are part of UVM’s REWARD TEENS weight management program – a research study for children ages 12 to 18 that promotes weight loss and teaches participants how to make healthy choices about the food they eat.

The participants being put through their paces in this training session are all UVM students who will be working on this study with Tompkins and Amy Nickerson, director of UVM’s Masters in Dietetics Program.
Amy Nickerson//Director, UVM MS in Dietetics Program: ‘The students that were in the simulated clinic today, they are on the cusp of graduating from their program and they’ll be registered dieticians or an exercise physiologist and a good part of their work as nutrition professionals will be helping people lose weight and manage their weight because of all the connections to chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease and arthritis.’

Nickerson uses props to show the correct serving sizes for different foods. Gaining a better understanding of portion size is one of the key ingredients to this program.

Nickerson: ‘portion size is a really difficult concept to grasp … the manufacturers have done a good job at derailing what health professionals would think is a healthy portion, 12 oz. container of juice for example. We would consider that to be three servings of juice whereas the consumer thinks it’s in one serving container that’s a serving size.’

Instilling good nutrition habits goes hand-in-glove with being ‘active,’ which for Tompkins doesn’t always mean exercise.

Tompkins: “Any movement is activity. If they go out and garden that’s activity -- that counts in your exercise. I think part of our job is to demonstrate to people that it doesn’t have to be walking on the treadmill thirty minutes a day every day, so there’s some science behind the exercise which is what we study with the VO2Max or the metabolism, but exercise can just be fun.

Maintaining a healthy weight and building skills to eat healthy does require practice, but what it really takes…is work.

Nickerson: ‘No matter what your body weight, you have to work at staying fit because of the culture that we live in, which is where there’s food everywhere. There’s vending machine food, there’s all these foods that aren’t necessarily designed to improve our health and well-being and so it does take work.’

Tompkins: ‘and it’s really calories in calories out so if one part of that equation doesn’t quite fit in terms of your calories in, but you’re not exercising those calories just sort of stay in, so, it’s a balancing act and we try to work together to let people know that it’s really living and overall healthy lifestyle.’

Running, resting, and eating right … it’s how a body works to maintain a healthy lifestyle through the REWARD TEENS weight management program. At the University of Vermont, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Thanks Keith. With me now are the two professionals who guide the UVM Pediatric Weight Management Program. Connie Tompkins and Amy Nickerson thanks so much for being with us. Connie take us a step back from the video can you give us a sketch of what the REWARD TEENS pediatric weight management program is all about?

Connie.: Sure; it's a group program where we work for 12 weeks together. It includes nutrition education, physical activity education, and underlying both of those is behavior change. It's a
group setting where we work with the child and at least one parent and peer support as well.

Judy.: Weekly meetings are part of the program?

Connie.: They are. We meet once a week for about 2 hours. During that time we usually cover a little bit of everything. A little bit of physical activity a little bit of nutrition and we usually do some activity as well.

Judy.: Why is the program in a group setting rather than one on one?

Connie.: To get the interaction, the peer support for one, but also the family support that you're not the only one going through this there's other people in the same boat and to learn about different ideas on how to change habits or what works for one family might work for another and they can share ideas.

Judy.: A parent attends is that just to share the information because I assume in a household it's a parent who is buying the food mostly.

Connie.: That's part of it but what it is, is you're changing your whole lifestyle and behavior. You can’t focus on the child alone it's a family dynamic so the whole family has to be on board to support the child to lose weight but on the same token we're not giving any stringent diets that a whole family couldn't follow.

Judy.: Can you tell us about some of the strategies that the program promotes?

Amy.: Some of the food strategies include from the get go we asked them to keep food records because it's such an important part of a successful weight management program. We helped them to learn how to estimate portion sizes whether they actually pull out a measuring cup or we give them some visuals like a Ping-Pong ball or a tennis ball or a computer mouse to trying when their way from the home and they can't actually have those measuring cups with them. We're teaching about portion size were also teaching them about mindful eating. There's a lot out in the news these days about being aware of what you eat. Many people have heard about putting your fork down after each bite you take. Finish chewing the bite, then pick your fork up again and a lot of that relates to the success of the strategy. It helps you to be aware of the taste that you are experiencing so we call that mindful eating. Some of the other strategies are trying to encourage the participants to drink plain water because we find that that's a forgotten commodity in a number of these families there all buying bottled sweet and vitamin beverages or those juice drinks and Crystal Lights. Then there's the whole idea of planning in advance. We really spend a lot of time troubleshooting what if you're at a party with a group of your friends hanging out. We have a 12-week curriculum so each week we have a few goals and objectives that we want to achieve and another big component is the goal setting piece. We help these kids not only set goals related to their food intake but also the physical activity piece. Everybody in our culture has nurtured the sense of set big goals like I want to lose 20 pounds in two months for example which is very unrealistic. We try and break it down. Our goal setting is not so much based on the weight that they lose its more on food behavior changes that they make and physical activity changes that they can make. We're gradually nudging them towards a healthier lifestyle for the whole family.

Judy.: So this is different from just going on a diet?
Connie.: That's right. We're trying to instill behaviors that they could follow their whole life because you can't be on a diet your whole life you can’t say you are going to work out an hour every single day for the rest of your life. Everything is in moderation and fitting healthy behaviors into your entire life not just for these three months.

Amy.: If I could add too the notion of going on a diet suggests that you'll go off a diet.

Judy.: You do to achieve that goal in then you say I can go back to doing whenever I do.

Amy.: We call that ‘relapse’ when you go right back to where you were and in many cases you actually gain more than you originally lost that's part of the rebound affect. So rather than calling it a diet we just keep referring to it as a healthy meal plan and the family can eat this way. The relapse phenomenon makes me think that one of the important messages we send to the family that children who are participating or the teens and their parents is it's OK to set a goal and not meet your goal. We don't want the participants to get into this mindset both I didn't meet my goal today I'm a failure so I'm just going to abandon the whole thing. I think that's part of an additional benefit to having a group setting is that the other participants can hear that they're not perfect either because we're not looking for perfection we want to help these participants learn that part of life is that you do well towards your goal some days and then you may fall short of that but the important thing is that you get back on track the next day.

Judy.: What happens if they do meet their goals?

Connie.: We give lots of positive reinforcement a lot of times we give physical activity equipment balls or resistance bands, things to help them stretch or just be active. Certain nutritional items.

Judy.: What observations have you made about the food and physical activity environment for the teens and the families that have participated so far?

Connie.: A lot of our job consists of dispelling some of them it's in rumors out there that particularly for physical activity that if you're not going all out and feel like your hearts about to pump out of your chest then it's not worth it. When really you could do small amounts slowly build up over time and you will see some payoff to it and you can be healthy and get results from these small little bouts of activity.

Amy.: On the food side some of the observations that we've made are that it's very striking that families are not sitting down to eat dinner together anymore. There's a lot of research that suggests that that's very important in terms of establishing healthy behaviors within the family and it's because of the lifestyle we live. Mom and dad are both working so there might be a crock pot of something to help yourself to when you get home of the end of the day but there's little sense of them all coming together and that you can talk about your day and model healthy eating behavior.

Judy.: There's the whole clean plate club aspect of food eating. I guess it's a whole different philosophy to think you don't have to clean your plate when you are full, or feel like you're full you can stop eating.
Amy.: And that taps into this whole mindful eating phenomenon where you're aware of hunger and you're aware that you've had enough to eat. We also talk about it takes the brain about 20 minutes to register that I'm having something to eat and I should feel full after this. So we're trying to get the participants and their parents because quite often that parent has a weight problem as well. But to teach everybody how to tune into their internal signals for hunger and satiety and one of those successful strategies for that is to simply use smaller plates serve smaller amounts of food. If somebody wants seconds they can go and get seconds if they're still hungry but if you serve a large portion of food on the plate we will all eat it because we are creatures of habit.

Judy.: So you mentioned that keeping a journal of what you are eating. What's done with that information?

Amy.: That's a good question. We have two nutrition graduate students and a couple of exercise physiology students. My students look at the food records and the participants are asked to record everything they can eat and drink every day of the program 12 weeks. Not everybody meets that high standard, but the students will look at the quantity of food the types of food the times of day they've eaten the food and how did they feel. Again we're trying to work with these participants to tune into did they eat when they were bored? So the participants have to look at or have to record all that information and the students are looking and picking up behaviors that the participants had and that's where we establish what might be a goal for the following week.

Judy.: Interesting. We're just about out of time. Connie how can someone get more information about the program?

Connie.: They can contact me. My phone number is (802) 656-3817, or they can email me at connie.tompkins@uvm.edu.

Judy.: And you are looking for participants?

Connie.: We always are, 12 to 18 year olds every three months.

Judy.: All right. Thank you so much for joining us. Interesting stuff. That's our program for today. I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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