



Hospitals help Dist. 15 fight child obesity

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Palatine Township Elementary School District 15 students are a bit softer around the middle than their American peers.

That's why Northwest Community Hospital and Healthworld in Barrington have teamed to implement a program aimed at lowering the skyrocketing rate of childhood obesity.

Starting this fall, intensive nutrition and health education will be incorporated into fourth-grade curriculum.

"Prevention is a lot easier than correction," said Karen Baker, community health programs manager at the Arlington Heights-based hospital. "We want to keep people healthy and out of the hospital, and starting at an early age is key."

About 17 percent of area youth are considered overweight or obese, higher than the national average of 14 percent, said Baker.

"It's scary," Baker said. "It's everything from us being so busy to the kids sitting in front of computers all day."

The program's benchmark has been set at 5 percent overweight and obese children, a lofty goal that falls in line with the government's Healthy People 2010 initiative.

The hospital, which will operate the program for a minimum of three to five years, is absorbing all the costs.

In addition to coming into classrooms, Northwest Community and Healthworld will put on family wellness nights at school. Activities may include a beverage station where students measure out how much sugar they consume daily.

"We'll show that health doesn't have to just be calisthenics and running around the track," Baker said.

Outreach is another important aspect. That's particularly true in the Hispanic community, which Baker says is at twice the risk of the rest of the population of being overweight or obese. They plan to work with Latino women on healthy cooking, for instance.

Baker says Northwest Community will take pre- and post-program measurements such as how much knowledge children have retained and make modifications as needed.

The partnership with District 15 is part of the hospital's three-tiered community health initiative plan targeting overweight children, smoking cessation and prostate screening.