

Today, one of the most widespread issues in the Navajo community is obesity. The main causes of obesity are a sedentary lifestyle and poor diet which can be the result of a low income or lack of health education. The effects of obesity are serious. Being severely overweight has been linked to several cancers and diseases. Stopping obesity from plaguing our communities starts with our youth. Encouraging young ones to eat healthy and be active is vital, as lifestyles and dietary habits are established in childhood. If we do nothing to stop obesity, the Navajo culture will continue to die out, along with the people.

Obesity is medically defined as having a body mass index over 30. A body mass index, or BMI is a weight to height ratio used to estimate body fat for the average person. To put this in perspective, a BMI under 18.5 is considered underweight, from 18.5 to 24.9 is the healthy or normal range, 25 to 29.9 is overweight, and finally, a body mass index over 30 is obese. (*Defining Overweight and Obesity*, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Web. 25 June 2004.) Obesity has become a recent trend; the rate of obesity among the Navajo has tripled in the past 20 years. A study conducted at Shiprock Hospital found that 25% of boys and 33% of girls in a sample of 352 Navajo adolescents were obese. ("Obesity Among Navajo Adolescents. Relationship to Dietary Intake and Blood Pressure." *Am. J Dis. Child*, 1992. Web.) The national average for obesity in the same age group including both boys *and* girls is estimated to be around 33%. ("Obesity in Children and Teens, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry." www.aacap.org. No. 79. May 2008.)

The traditional Navajo diet consisted of mostly grains, beans, and starchy vegetables like blue bread, mutton stew (with corn and potatoes), roasted corn, pinto beans, chokecherry paddies, and pinion nuts. ("Traditional Navajo Food Pyramid." Regional Education Assistance Program at NMSU, n.d. n.p.), all of which are high in nutrients and low in fat. Milk, meat, fats, sweets, which have little to no nutrients and are pretty high in fat compared to vegetables, took up a smaller amount of the diet. Today, if I look in my relative's pantry or refrigerator, I am likely to see fried potato chips, soda, packaged pastries, instant soups (which have more than enough of one's daily value for sodium), red

meat, and little no vegetables or grains. Having a low income has been considered a risk for having poor health. People in lower-income groups are found to have high fat intake and lower intakes of fresh fruit and vegetables. Around 43% of Navajos live below the poverty line. (“Background on EPA Advanced Notice of Proposed Rule-making Regarding The Navajo Generating Station and the Four Corners Power Plant”, Central Arizona Project, www.capsmartenergy.com. n.d. Web.) The high poverty rate in the Navajo community is a huge contributing factor the rising obesity rate. The cost of fresh fruit and vegetables is more than it was 30 years ago. Processed and fast foods are a cheap but deadly last resort for many poor families because they cannot afford healthy foods. Over time, eating foods high in fat on a regular basis usually results in being overweight or obese.

Being obese is extremely dangerous. Scientists have attributed obesity to an increased risk of developing heart disease, type two diabetes, sleep apnea, many types of cancer, and arthritis. (DW James (“Obesity.” Lancet Publishers. p. 366 2005.) Unsurprisingly, obesity reduces life expectancy. Generally, the more obese a person is, the lower their life expectancy. It isn't a surprise that diabetes rates have increased along with obesity rates among the Navajo. In fact, most diseases associated with obesity were nearly unheard of in Navajo communities 60 years ago. Our lifestyles and eating habits are making our lives shorter and reducing the quality of those shorter lives. The Navajo live 4.2 years less than the national average. Heart disease is the second leading cause of death among Navajo. (James M. Mendlein, David S. Freeman, et. al., “Risk Factors for Coronary Heart Disease among Navajo Indians: Findings from the Navajo Health and Nutritional Survey”, The Journal of Nutrition Vol. 127 No. 10 October 1997.)

Stopping obesity isn't as simple as having programs like *Just Move It*. As mentioned earlier, having a low income is considered a risk for consuming unhealthy foods and nearly half of the Navajo live under the poverty line. To truly combat obesity and defeat it, the *financial* health of the Navajo has to improve. An astonishing 28% of Navajo families don't have kitchen facilities and many homes on the reservation lack plumbing and electricity. (“The Navajo Nation: Initial Response to the Health Care

Reform Initiative.” www.nihb.org. Web.) Improving the financial health of the Navajo in combination with health education is the only way to stop obesity from increasing among the Navajo. All the health education and occasional jogging in the world won't fix obesity if we cannot afford healthier foods or even have a kitchen to cook those foods in. Since eating habits and activity levels are typically established in childhood, Navajo parents should make it a priority to teach their children to be active and eat right.

The American Dietetic Association has endorsed a vegetarian diet, saying that if it is well rounded, it can aid in the prevention or treatment of obesity, heart disease, cancer, and diabetes (American Dietetic Association. “Vegetarian Diets Can Help Prevent Chronic Diseases, American Dietetic Association Says.” sciencedaily.com 3 July 2009. Web.) As a result, I have become a strict vegetarian to improve my health and the health of those around me by answering common questions about vegetarianism, explaining the benefits of reducing or eliminating meat from your diet, and reducing your chances of becoming obese. I plan to go to college and earn a communications degree. Someday I would like to use my skills from that communication degree to help spread awareness about health and important issues in the Navajo Nation.

One can only imagine what would happen if we didn't stop obesity from plaguing the Navajo community. I suppose that as the number of obese Navajo increased the diagnoses of diabetes and deaths caused by heart disease would increase as well. In addition that, the prevalence of arthritis, deep vein thrombosis, and other chronic diseases among Navajos would increase as well. As a result, our quality of life will continue to decline along with our life expectancy. Indeed, obesity is a grave issue. However, it is a problem that is completely preventable. Through health education, exercise, political and social action against poverty, obesity can be eradicated from the Navajo community.

REFERENCES

- “Defining Overweight and Obesity”, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Web. 24 June 2005.
- “Obesity Among Navajo Adolescents. Relationship to Dietary Intake and Blood Pressure.” Am. J Dis. Child, 1992. Web.
- “Obesity in Children and Teens”, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. www.aacap.org. No. 79. May 2008.
- “Traditional Navajo Food Pyramid”, Regional Education Assistance Program at NMSU, n.d. n.p.
- “Background on EPA Advanced Notice of Proposed Rule-making Regarding The Navajo Generating Station and the Four Corners Power Plant”, Central Arizona Project, www.capsmartenergy.com. n.d. Web.
- DW James. “Obesity”. Lancet Publishers. p. 366 2005.
- James M. Mendlein, David S. Freeman, et. al., “Risk Factors for Coronary Heart Disease among Navajo Indians: Findings from the Navajo Health and Nutritional Survey”, The Journal of Nutrition Vol. 127 No. 10 October 1997.
- “The Navajo Nation: Initial Response to the Health Care Reform Initiative”, www.nihb.org. Web.
- American Dietetic Association. “Vegetarian Diets Can Help Prevent Chronic Diseases, American Dietetic Association Says.” sciencedaily.com 3 July 2009. Web.