ASTPHND BRIEF

The Role of Public Health Nutrition in Obesity Prevention

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reversing the obesity epidemic in this country requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach to transform communities into places that support and promote healthy lifestyle choices for all residents. Public health's role in obesity prevention is to create environments that support people in making healthy eating and active lifestyle choices. Public health nutritionists are the professionals trained to facilitate change around healthy eating.

Public health nutritionists are essential members of any team that addresses obesity prevention. A public health nutritionist is a professional with academic training and experience in both public health and nutrition and is often a registered dietitian with advanced degrees.

Public Health Nutritionists are essential to obesity prevention because they are:

- Experts in nutrition science and public health
- Specialists in nutrition and healthy feeding practices throughout life
- Experts about the relationship between food and how it affects individual and population health
- Qualified to interpret the influences of agriculture and food on health to then make informed decisions about disease prevention and treatment
- Trained to take a comprehensive view of food systems from growing, distribution, selection, and preparation
- Knowledgeable about the use of medical nutrition therapy to treat and prevent diseases and medical conditions
- Experienced at evaluating scientific evidence related to food, nutrition and health to make informed decisions aimed at improving the public's health
- Trained in finance, budgeting, and personnel, contract and grants management essential to managing complex grants and programs
- Skilled at designing and interpreting food and nutrition assessment and surveillance systems findings
- Effective at developing public health strategies and programs for nutrition, food and wellness that make a difference at the individual, population and policy levels

Public Health Nutritionists' Role in Obesity Prevention

The goal of public health nutrition in obesity prevention is to create environments where eating well and being active are the easy, natural choices. The high rate of obesity in the United States is the result of both environmental factors and individual behaviors. Environmental factors include policies and practices that support or hinder healthy eating and physical activity. Multiple, sustainable interventions that occur concurrently are needed if obesity prevention is to be successful. Current public health obesity prevention practices seek to change the policy, systems and environmental arenas, as these factors will influence the most people.

The following figure from the Institute of Medicine's report, ***Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention: Solving the Weight of the Nation***[1], illustrates the different influences on a population's weight status.

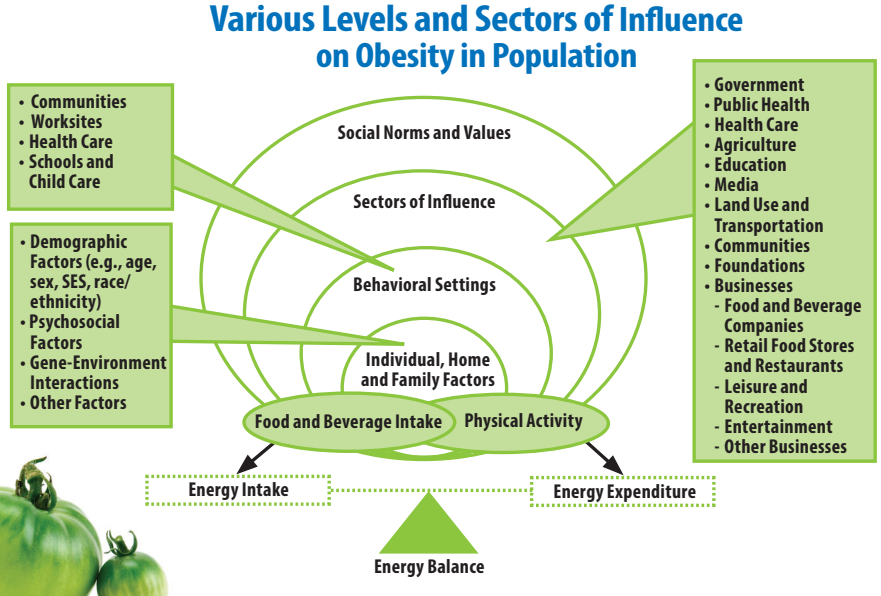

Figure 3-2 Various levels and sectors of influence on obesity in populations.
NOTE: SES = socioeconomic status SOURCE: Adapted from IOM, 2007

The following are some examples of what public health nutritionists do as part of obesity prevention efforts.

Environmental and Policy Examples

- Translate complicated nutrition research into understandable and scientifically accurate messages for use in a healthy eating campaign
- Provide guidance to decision-makers on the implication of changes to federal food programs and the health of at-risk populations
- Alter environmental factors that influence healthy eating such as reducing sodium in the food supply
- Develop the nutrition component of evidence-based guidelines and training materials for health professionals working with obesity prevention
- Manage advisory groups on food security, food policy, breastfeeding support or obesity prevention that identify effective strategies to enhance nutrition within these diverse groups
- Design healthy weight strategies for preconception care campaigns targeting health care providers
- Effectively manage complicated food and nutrition programs such as WIC
- Develop the nutrition component of surveillance systems and use that information to take action to prevent obesity

Public health nutritionists are the professionals trained to facilitate change around healthy eating.

Community-Based Settings (Worksites, Health Care, Schools, Childcare, etc.) Examples

- Plan and coordinate farmers' markets or farm-to-school programs to increase access to healthy food
- Lead efforts to develop strong nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold within government office buildings
- Work with food service operations and restaurants, to increase the number of healthy foods and beverages and decrease the unhealthy options offered to customers
- Develop workplace policies that address subjects such as breastfeeding support, healthy vending, and healthy meeting food standards
- Work with communities to develop citywide wellness plans that include healthy eating and active living goals
- Train health care providers in community health centers about optimal weight gain to improve pregnancy outcomes
- Develop model standards to help school districts create, implement, and evaluate wellness policies
- Integrate evidence-based nutrition education into trainings offered to child care providers about incorporating healthy feeding practices for young children

Individual, Home and Family Examples

- Empower, counsel and coach people to eat well and be physically active
- Assist low income families in accessing needed health and nutrition services

Summary

Public health nutritionists make it easier for people to be active and eat well. They are essential partners in obesity prevention work at any level. They have skills to translate evidence into effective food and nutrition programs, policies, systems and environmental change strategies that enhance environments and support healthy choices. All efforts addressing obesity prevention should include the services of public health nutritionists.

Public health nutritionists are essential members of any team that addresses obesity prevention, as they bring unique skills and expertise to these efforts.

[1]IOM (Institute of Medicine). 2012. Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention: Solving the Weight of the Nation. Washington, DC. P 90 Retrieved September, 2012 http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=13275

This publication was supported by the Association of State and Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors' Cooperative Agreement Number 5U58DP002233-03 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

ASSOCIATION OF STATE & TERRITORIAL PUBLIC HEALTH NUTRITION DIRECTORS

P.O. BOX 1001 • JOHNSTOWN, PA 15907-1001 • [TEL] 814.255.2829 • [FAX] 814.255.6514 • WWW.ASTPHND.ORG