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Walking program targets obesity

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) -- Walking 30 minutes a day, three times a week and decreasing fat intake by 1 to 3 percent could help curb Oklahoma's climbing obesity rate, state health officials said Thursday as they rallied residents to become more active.

Oklahoma Health Commissioner Dr. Leslie Beitsch led hundreds of people on a walk of several blocks from the University of Oklahoma Health Science Center to the steps of the Capitol. Called "Walk this Weigh Oklahoma," the event was intended to emphasize the importance of exercise.

Nearly 56 percent of the state's population is either obese or overweight. That falls in line with the national average, but is still alarming to state health officials.

"We've not been good role models," Beitsch said. "Nearly 15 percent of our kids are obese."

State employees, some wearing suits and tennis shoes, streamed out of buildings to follow a high school marching band and hundreds of other people walking on their lunch hour.

Sheryl Sommer and her co-worker donned tennis shoes with their skirts and left their office for the noontime walk.

"People are becoming aware that we have a problem," said Sommer, a registered dietitian. "It's going to take a lot of effort to face this thing."

Getting Oklahomans to be more active is part of a set of Health Department initiatives aimed at improving the health of Oklahomans by 2010.

The state ranks near the bottom of the list for health, partly because of high smoking rates and heart disease, according to the United-Health Foundation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls Oklahoma one of the three worst states for heart disease deaths.

Being overweight and sedentary also adds to the cost of health care, Beitsch said.

"Obesity increases health care costs by 36 percent," Beitsch told the crowd gathered at the Capitol. "Tell that to the taxpayers."

Oklahoma's battle of the bulge also has created a partnership between the Health Department and Oklahoma's McDonald's restaurants.

The fast-food chain provided booklets for participants to track their fitness progress and coupons promoting new healthier fare.

"We want people to know that you can eat healthy at McDonald's," said Jessica Anderson, a spokeswoman for the Oklahoma restaurants.

"We're concerned with obesity rates and we're concerned about the health of Oklahomans."

Nineteen other cities took part in Thursday's walk.

In Kingfisher, located about 45 miles northwest of Oklahoma City, participants weighed in as a group at a grain elevator and set a goal, as a town, to lose weight.