



Background

Individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) can lead healthy and active lives, yet disparities in health and well-being exist. Historically, adults with IDD have not been offered the same health-promoting benefits society has offered its nondisabled peers. Many chronic health conditions experienced by adults with disabilities are preventable and result, at least in part, from factors such as physical inactivity and food choices that are within their control. Changing the practices that influence physical activity and nutrition choices can improve these risk factors and lessen the incidence of obesity and other chronic illness.

Approach

The Wellness for Every Body initiative uses an environmental approach that targets foster care homes for intervention and creates conditions that establish healthy living as the norm. The goal is to ensure that these facilities provide opportunities and environments that allow clients to make healthy choices. The first step in the process is to determine the extent to which healthy eating and physical activity are currently supported in the homes, and in day training and habilitation (DT&H) sites. Managers then select their priorities for improvement, and county staff provide technical assistance on how to create lasting change in their operations.

Innovation

The National Association of County and City Health Officials and the American Public Health Association identified a lack of health promotion services targeted to individuals with developmental disabilities. Hennepin County is one of a very few local health departments across the country to address this challenge. Although others have developed curricula and training materials, our project takes a “whole environment” approach to health improvement rather than focusing only on the behaviors of individuals with IDD.

Benefits for adults with IDD

Poor diets and sedentary behaviors are related to obesity and other illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, some cancers, diabetes, and hypertension. Individuals with primary disabilities have a higher rate of these “secondary conditions.” Improved nutrition and increased physical activity can help control or prevent these secondary conditions, resulting in an improved quality of life.

Benefits for residents, staff, and service providers

Healthy dietary behaviors and increased physical activity can set the stage for physical improvements for residents, and ease the burden and expense of direct care for staff and service providers. When individuals with developmental delays embrace healthier lifestyles, they become more independent, reach personal goals, and achieve greater integration into the community.

Healthier lifestyles for the people you support may result in decreases in:

- Falls and severity of fall injuries.
- Behavior problems.
- Constipation and bowel impaction.
- Health-care visits and medical costs.

They also may include improvements in:

- Mobility.
- Energy.
- Fitness.
- Self-esteem.

Additional benefits for service providers

How healthy is your work force? Are you doing all you can to help employees keep their medical costs down? A collateral benefit of the Wellness for Every *Body* program is improved employee health. By exposing staff to healthier worksite environments and education, the potential to improve employee nutrition and physical activity behavior is also within reach.

Savvy employers know that healthy employees lead to increased productivity and morale, and lower health-care costs. Employees notice and appreciate efforts by employers to help them lead healthy lifestyles. As Minnesota and the nation face unprecedented increases in adult obesity and associated costs, allowing employees to choose healthier foods and be more active at work will help prevent chronic diseases.

Provide an environment where employees can put healthy habits into practice!