TuSalud

Monitoring Your Nutritional Habits

Why are Latino children struggling with both obesity and hunger?

March 1, 2013 By Casey Halter

Doctors consider diet a key factor in maintaining lasting physical, mental and emotional health. But what exactly does good nutrition entail for Latinos?

More than 60 percent of U.S. adults said they tracked their weight and nutrition regularly, according to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project. However, only 51 percent of Latinos regularly monitored their nutritional habits. The study also found that Latinos were less likely to track other related health indicators like their blood pressure or blood sugar.

To focus attention on making informed food choices and developing healthy eating and exercise habits, the U.S. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has designated March as National Nutrition Month. This year's theme, "Eat Right, Your Way, Every Day," marks the 40th anniversary of the annual awareness campaign, which encourages healthy diets based on individual food preferences, lifestyle, cultural traditions and individual health concerns.

Maintaining positive eating habits is especially important for the Latino community. Currently, Latinos are struggling on two sides of the same coin regarding their nutritional health. On one side, two-fifths (38.5 percent) of Latino youth ages 2 to 19 were found to be overweight or obese by a 2008 Pew Hispanic research center study, and about one in four Latinos were reported obese. On the other side, Latino children are also, on average, the hungriest in the country, constituting almost 40 percent of the 1 million U.S. children living in hunger, according to studies by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR).

NCLR also found that irregular prenatal nutritional care had a drastically negative effect on the health and development of unborn children. Both high and low birth weights are linked with greater odds of childhood obesity. The U.S. Bureau of the Census reports that one in every five school children nationwide are Latino and that by 2030 the proportion will be nearly one in three. The future of the country is directly linked to the fate of Latino families, children and their nutrition.

Poor diet puts communities at a higher risk for many health problems. Obesity is linked with heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, asthma, sleep apnea and diabetes. Living in a community with a high concentration of Latinos was associated with an overall increase in body mass index

(BMI) in the Pew Hispanic Research Center study. The study also reported that Latinos were almost 1.5 times more likely to have diabetes than non-Hispanic whites, with 9.5 percent of Latino adults affected by the disease.

The risks of malnutrition range from fainting, chronic fatigue and a lack of growth in children, to mental or physical disability and possible death. For the 400,000 Latino children in the United States currently living in hunger, improving the quality and quantity of their food is of utmost importance.

The encouraging news is that simply eating a healthy and balanced diet can lower the risk of these health problems. Latinos are already less likely to have chronic illnesses, certain cancers, high blood pressure and asthma than any other U.S. demographic. However, they are more likely to be at risk of many preventable diseases related directly to diet.

So, how can we improve? There are many things we can do to ensure our nutritional health. Doctors recommend keeping track of numbers like caloric intake, weight and BMI to ensure a healthy lifestyle. Consulting with a height-weight chart and self-monitoring this data is easy with the multitude of websites and apps like Nutrition Menu, Ideal Weight and Mint Nutrition.

A normal BMI falls between 18.5 and 24.9. Anything below this threshold is considered underweight, and a value between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight. Any BMI value above 30 is considered obese.

Seeing a regular physician is also an important step in attaining positive nutrition habits in the Latino community. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that Latinos were twice as likely as blacks and three times more likely than whites to lack a regular health care provider. Many respondents in the study cited being uninsured, experiencing language barriers in the U.S. health care system and preferring to treat themselves as reasons for their lack of a primary physician.

However, clinically monitoring height-weight factors works better than self-monitoring. In an all-race NCLR study, one-third of all mothers reportedly misclassified their own and their child's weight status.

Meal planning and making healthy substitutions to traditional meals are other great ways to improve our nutritional health. Cutting out fatty foods like cheese, processed carbohydrates and sugary drinks for lean proteins, whole-grains and ample fruits and vegetables are easy ways to ensure a healthy diet. Oldways.org, a nonprofit nutrition organization with the mission to guide people to good health through heritage designed a Latin American Food Pyramid incorporating traditional Latino foods into proper nutritional guidelines.

Eating an abundance of fruit and vegetables—at least three to four servings per day—can help control blood pressure, stave off heart disease and certain cancers and safeguard against two common causes of vision loss. Each day, we also need 9 grams of protein for every 20 pounds we

weigh; this keeps our tissues from breaking down and supplies our bodies with essential amino acids that the body can't make from scratch. And multivitamins can act as a cheap nutritional safeguard for nutrients like calcium, zinc and vitamin B.

If access to adequate food resources is a problem, the government has programs designed to help impoverished families with their nutritional needs. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) provides additional resources to eligible citizens and mixed-status families hoping to improve the quantity and quality of the food they are able to buy. In 2008, more than 4 million Latinos took part in SNAP.

Pregnant women and mothers with children up to age 5 can also apply to the Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) for additional food resources.

The food we put on our tables is what keeps us strong, sound and ready to tackle life's difficulties. Keeping tabs on weight and diet is statistically proved to help people make positive choices in other areas of their lives. Therefore, it's important for us to monitor the quality and quantity of our nutrition and its effects on our health, every day.

If you're interested in promoting National Nutrition Month in your community, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has created a toolkit to help spread the word. It also has a Media Materials Section, where you can download press kits and public service announcements in both English and Spanish.

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http://beta.docker.tusaludmag.com/article/latino-nutrition-habits-23578-9515