

Our view

Join contest, lose weight for good goal: your health

Central Minnesotans looking for ways to lose weight, eat right and avoid heart disease might learn something by watching 1,000 of their neighbors the next 12 months.

The "Heart Healthy Central Minnesota" campaign is well on its way to signing up 1,000 people from eight area communities who will spend a year doing their best to reduce their risk of heart disease, the leading cause of death nationwide.

Participating communities are in a friendly competition for weight loss and such, but the overall goal is to improve participants' health and raise awareness about preventing heart disease.

For those who already are signed up, we wish them luck. And we encourage them to share their experiences in the coming months through these Opinion Pages.

The rest of us will be watching to see how big a difference exercise, a healthy diet and avoiding tobacco can have on heart-disease risk factors.

How it works

The CentraCare Health Foundation and five other local groups are sponsoring the campaign. They include Health Partners, which debuted its 10,000 Steps program recently, CentraCare Health System, Central Minnesota Heart Center, the American Heart Association and pharmacies at Coborn's/Cash Wise stores in participating communities.

The participating communities include the St. Cloud area, St. Cloud State University, Little Falls, Albany, Melrose, Elk River, Willmar and Long Prairie.

Each community enrolls a set number of participants. Upon enrolling, participants agree to provide their height, weight, blood pressure, glucose level and cholesterol level. They also agree to provide quarterly updates on their weight and blood pressure.

After a year, all those readings will be measured again to see how individuals did in combating heart-disease risk factors, which include being overweight, smoking, poor eating habits and not exercising.

In return, participants get a pedometer, coupons for healthy food, T-shirts and even a chance to win a trip to Cancun.

Registration started with St. Cloud State in August. The St. Cloud area and Melrose signed people up Saturday. Little Falls and Elk River do their's Sept. 18, Willmar's is Sept. 27, Albany's is Oct. 2 and Long Prairie's will be in early October.

St. Cloud State and St. Cloud-area registrations drew 150 and more than 223 people respectively, said Terri Shipshock, director of community initiatives for the health foundation. Another signup session for the area could be held later this month, depending on enrollment elsewhere.

Why do it

The reason for the campaign is simple. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said 710,760 died from heart disease in 2000. That same year about 15 million Americans were told they had some form of heart disease.

Central Minnesota is similar. Minnesota Department of Health records show it was the leading cause of death in 2001 in Benton and Morrison counties. In Stearns and Sherburne counties, it ran a close second to cancer.

That coupled with United States' trend toward gaining weight and failing to exercise helped spur the campaign. Through it, the area will not only learn about the biggest risk factors, but the benefits of controlling them.