

Eastern North Carolina Fights Cost of Obesity

By Allison Millsaps

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While obesity gains momentum as a fast-rising killer across the United States, residents of eastern North Carolina are particularly falling victim to this nationwide epidemic.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 57 percent of North Carolina adults are either overweight or obese. Yet, even more alarming is that in all of North Carolina, only eastern counties showed obesity rates of greater than 70 percent of the adult population.

Obesity has taken hold of eastern North Carolina in a detrimental way. The problem has spiraled out of control, often taking on forms far more severe than oversized jeans and unsightly bulges. Serious health problems such as heart disease, blood clots, stroke, and adult-onset diabetes are just a few of the life-threatening issues stemming from obesity. And in this region, the biggest obstacles toward combating this problem seem to persist somewhere along the community's extremely divided socioeconomic lines.

The state—in particular, the eastern region—has made some groundbreaking advances toward preventing and treating obesity. Three years ago, a now nationally-implemented program called the Obesity Prevention Initiative was created and implemented through a community-campus collaborative in New Hanover and Brunswick counties. The “Eat Smart Move More” organization was founded in Robeson County, which coincidentally also represents the state's highest diabetes rate by county.

Additionally, medical advances have been made right here in eastern North Carolina as well. Pitt County Memorial Hospital in Greenville is a leader in bariatric and weight loss-related surgery, and every year thousands of overweight eastern North Carolina patients visit PCMH for treatment.

However, all of these resources come with a price that not everyone can afford to pay. As poor as it is overweight, the region's population is in effect faced with an expensive, life-threatening problem and no money to fight it. The cost of bariatric surgery entangled with the insurance disparities of today creates problems that many don't consider worth the effort.

“I saved up for the surgery because I knew I would die if I didn't. I was throwing my life away, one Dollar Value Meal at a time,” said Jenna Welstadt, 34, of Lumberton, N.C. Welstadt had gastric bypass surgery in 2006 at PCMH, but it was not an easy process.

Welstadt, a fifth-grade teacher in Robeson County, says that she became aware of her serious weight problem when she reached 350 pounds in 2004. Upon deciding to make a change, Welstadt did her research and decided that weight loss surgery—namely, gastric bypass—was the best route for her. However, on a public school teacher's budget, the surgery would have to be bought with a high price.

“Uncovered, bariatric surgeries can cost upwards of \$10,000,” said Jared Fisher, a public affairs associate for PCMH. “We get patients all the time asking about the surgery, but when we tell

them the steps they need to take, it's often enough to discourage them. Unfortunately, this means that many people who need these life saving surgeries never receive treatment because they simply cannot afford to do so."

The steps Fisher is referring to are a strict outline of requirements that must be met in order to be fully covered for surgery. According to BlueCross BlueShield of North Carolina, patients become eligible for full insurance coverage if they fulfill six requirements. Criteria for eligibility include having a BMI (body mass index) over 35 which causes interference on daily life; a thorough examination to prove the physical capability to handle surgery; having no treatable cause for obesity (such as endocrine disease); and finally—perhaps, most importantly—compliance with a pre-surgical, surgical and post-surgical program.

Programs for weight loss surgeries are time consuming and require significant commitment on the patient's behalf. Qualified candidates must essentially prove to their doctors that they are willing to make a lifestyle change; this means complying with all new nutrition habits, willingness to stay active, and overall dedication toward getting healthy—not just "thinner."

"A lot of people just think about the weight aspect. They don't see that underneath all the weight, their lungs are being literally smothered. Vital organs are shutting down. And especially the heart is getting weaker and weaker by the day. Heart disease is often generated by complications with being overweight or obese," said Fisher.

For Welstadt, the solution was easier said than done: "When I found out I'd have to make all these trips to Greenville just to prove to them I wanted the surgery, I realized I didn't have the time or money to commit to trying to get into one of their programs. Who has time for that? It's not like I don't have other responsibilities. So, I decided to just save up. And that's what I did, for two years. Now I'm still paying it off, but I truly believe gastric bypass saved my life," said Welstadt.

Welstadt represents many in her age group, location and income level who would qualify for weight loss surgery. However, Welstadt actually represents a minority as well, being one of few in her demographic who go through with weight loss surgery.

A problem that can be logically linked to the obesity epidemic in eastern North Carolina is the fact that the region is the poorest area of the state. According to the 2006 Census Bureau, over 10 eastern North Carolina counties had the lowest income per capita, per household. Poverty levels continue to rise in this area of the state, as population expands and the rest of the state's economy takes off.

Why is eastern North Carolina such a target? Eating healthy, for one, isn't cheap. Grocery shopping requires both time and money, and often, citizens are taking comfort in the cheap and easy routes offered by fast food.

"When I was eating badly, it was all fast food," said Welstadt. "I could get this and this for a dollar or two, and I didn't realize I was taking in hundreds and hundreds of calories."

Welstadt has lost 75 pounds since her surgery last year, and hopes to lose more. Unfortunately, not all people suffering from being overweight or obese have gotten to the root of their problem as she has. The fast food industry is booming in this region, with new chains opening up all the

time in counties across the eastern part of the state. In fact, Greenville alone already has plans for four new fast food franchises set to open shop in 2008.

An East Carolina University professor's new analysis of data from the U. S. Census Bureau for the past 30 years shows that North Carolina's rural and coastal areas suffer from high levels of poverty and low levels of education and economic growth, despite the state's efforts to improve conditions.

Mulatu Wubneh, professor and chair of ECU's Department of Geography, found that in 2000, 90 percent of the 41 counties in eastern North Carolina have a poverty rate above the state average of 12.3 percent, with most of these counties' rates between 15 and 24 percent.

Wubneh's findings suggest a startling trend throughout the eastern North Carolina landscape. Rising poverty levels combined with rising obesity rates are becoming a frighteningly powerful force, and high number of uninsured is feeding off of the problem. The Centers for Disease Control reports that the obesity rate among North Carolina adults rose by 82 percent from 1990 to 2002; the statistics from 2002 to 2014 are looking catastrophic at this point.