Keeping Diabetes at Bay

Small Changes Do Make a Big Difference in Preventing or Delaying Diabetes

Jesse Ortega did just what the team who developed Small Changes Make a Big Difference hoped he would do. After attending the one-hour, lunchtime workshop on diabetes awareness in Arapahoe County he lost weight, started exercising and he’s kept diabetes at bay.

Ortega, a workforce specialist with Arapahoe/Douglas Works, is happy he’s been able to avoid taking medicine, even after his doctor diagnosed him as “on the edge of having diabetes.”

Small Changes Make a Big Difference started in 2003 with Jane Frobose (pictured right in photo), Colorado State University Cooperative Extension family and consumer sciences agent in Denver, and Kay Zimka, then agent in Jefferson County. Each agent did needs assessments in their respective counties and decided to focus on diabetes for two reasons, said Frobose.

“First, type 2 diabetes is an epidemic in Colorado and across the country, and second, there was compelling research showing that for many people, this kind of diabetes can be controlled, or even prevented, by small lifestyle changes,” Frobose said.

Frobose and Zimka were joined by Sheila Gains (pictured at left in photo) and Jennifer Eich, also Colorado State Cooperative Extension agents in Arapahoe and Adams counties, respectively, along with dietetic interns from Colorado State. Their goal was to create a self-contained program that could be easily offered throughout the state. The team, along with collaborators from the department of food science and human nutrition at Colorado State, Colorado Diabetes Prevention and Control Program at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and Salud Family Health Centers, put the Small Changes package on a compact disc and offered the CD (in both English and Spanish) to agents and others working in public health in Colorado and Wyoming.

The CD includes a PowerPoint presentation, activities and handouts for participants, pre-, post and follow up surveys and evaluations, risk statistics for diabetes for Colorado and the nation, print-ready posters to promote the workshops and information on additional community resources.

Gains reported that during the first year, the program was delivered to more than 350 people in Colorado and the CD distributed to some 100 Extension agents and health educators in Colorado and Wyoming. Those participating have shown a 20 percent average increase in knowledge of type 2 diabetes, including risk factors, signs and symptoms, and disease complications. Most important, participants have learned actions they can take to reduce their risk or delay the onset of type 2 diabetes. Post surveys of participants showed that after taking the workshop, 89 percent developed a personal plan of action to change their behavior in at least one way to reduce their risk.

Gains said the one-hour session is appealing for several reasons. “We often present during a lunch hour, so it’s easier to make time. Also, this information is broadly aimed at those who think they may be in a high risk group or those who are interested in gaining information for a family member who may be at risk, so there’s no need for participants to identify themselves as diabetic,” Gains said. And probably most important for those attending, there’s good...
news about the steps people can take to fight this disease.

A 2002 research report from the national Diabetes Prevention Program at George Washington University showed that while lifestyle changes and treatment with medicine both reduced the incidence of diabetes in people at high risk, the lifestyle intervention was more effective than the drugs. Frobose adds, “Just a 5 to 7 percent weight loss and the addition of walking 30 minutes a day, five times a week, was shown to be effective in preventing diabetes in a high risk person. This is good news for a lot of people.”

Approximately 17 million people in the United States, or 6.2 percent of the population, have diabetes, a 50 percent jump from 1990 to 2000. About one-third of those with type 2 diabetes don’t know it, because the disease often shows no symptoms for seven to 10 years, Gains said. Early detection is important because over the years high blood glucose damages nerves and blood vessels, leading to complications including heart disease, stroke, blindness, nerve problems, kidney disease, gum infection and amputation.

For Jesse Ortega the program was just what he needed. “This class enlightened me. I was already doing about 75 percent of the things they recommend, but adding the other 25 percent really made a difference. My blood pressure and cholesterol are down and I’m doing more exercise. I’m even hoping I can get off my blood pressure medicine eventually.”

Jhanadu Garza, who works in risk management for Arapahoe County, said Small Changes Make a Big Difference helped her understand more about the diabetes that runs in her family and gave her the insight to make some changes, including losing weight. “I was really encouraged to learn that even a 10 percent weight loss could make a big difference for me,” Garza said.

— Mary Pat Adams

More Strides to Prevention

The Small Changes team has now revised the original program into a 2004 version with improvements based on test results, said Gloria Vellinga, community health coordinator with the Colorado Diabetes Prevention and Control Program and team member.

“This is just a great prevention message, and with all the bad news about the increasing numbers of people with type 2 diabetes, it’s important for us to talk about a program that really makes a difference in people’s lives,” Vellinga said.