



Physical Activity

An Antidote to Diabetes



ROBIN COOPER

By Joanne Littlefield

A balloon floats on the breeze created by an overhead fan. Squealing, a toddler chases after the balloon, his mother batting it back to him. A senior citizen looking on from her wheelchair joins in, scooting forward with her feet as the balloon brushes her arm. This simple and fun activity can take place just about anywhere. But on a reservation that winds along the Colorado River in western Arizona, it is helping people learn how to keep diabetes at bay.

Diabetes is a serious health concern for Americans from many walks of life, but it is of particular concern for American Indians. Members of the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) are learning about its warning signs and the important role proper nutrition and physical activity have in avoiding or controlling its debilitating effects.

A disease of the pancreas due to lack of insulin, diabetes symptoms include weight loss, frequent urination and fatigue. More commonly older people and those overweight suffer from Type 2 diabetes, which can sometimes be controlled with just diet; physical activity has been found to greatly reduce its effects.

Obesity and heart disease are also major health issues of concern on the reservation. When it comes to providing

opportunities for their residents, tribal administrators seem to be one step ahead most of the time, according to Robin Cooper, nutrition and fitness instructional specialist with La Paz County Cooperative Extension.

"I teach concepts and ideas about physical activity with the hope that, by training future facilitators, they will find a way to adapt the information for their own programs," she says. Cooper teaches classes using stability balls and conducts chair exercise for seniors to get those confined to a wheelchair active. She uses balloon tossing to stimulate physical activity and shows how to make healthy snack choices.

If a physical activity director calls on her to help design a three-month program in order to reinforce positive habits, Cooper relies on established UA Cooperative Extension programs that encourage a team approach. Having the moral support of someone else to work out with can often mean the difference between success or failure. Programs such as Walk Across Arizona, Bone Builders and Challenge have all been successfully used throughout the state to get participants to increase their physical activity.

When a new gym opened on the reservation in the summer of 2006, keeping people motivated to use it became

a top priority. Free of charge to all tribal members, the 6,600 square foot center has 24 strength-training machines and 20 cardiovascular exercise machines. The cardio stations include elliptical training machines, treadmills, stationary bikes and stair machines. The facility also includes a multipurpose room for exercise and health classes, as well as a full demonstration kitchen to teach CRIT members how to prepare healthier meals.

A new partnership between the CRIT Diabetes project and La Paz County Cooperative Extension is incorporating nutrition and physical activity education into new and existing programs at the facility. After Cooper presented a two-hour session of physical activity ideas in May 2007, the CRIT staff requested additional sessions.

"We really needed all day," CRIT Diabetes Project coordinator Doris Burns says. Since CRIT recreation and fitness programs span a wide age range, Burns is interested in information that can be adapted for children, young adults, adults and seniors.

"The programs they showed us worked well for pre-teens, but not so well for those younger," she says. "It would be helpful to have written, step-by-step instructions on how to modify the activities. In exercise and fitness classes, for example, the instructor will often say, 'Here's the exercise, here's how to adapt for knee problems; if you have bad hips, here's the variation that might work for you.'"

In addition to tribal agencies, schools and community groups also collaborate with La Paz County extension programs. Periodic workshops are designed to help participants learn about healthy diets and lifestyles, how to

COLORADO RIVER INDIAN TRIBES

At almost 270,000 acres, mostly in Arizona, The Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) reservation spans both sides of the Colorado River with 90 miles of shoreline. Established in 1865, it was designated the second Indian reservation in Arizona. Rather than being established for a specific tribe, it was developed for Indians living along the river, which include Mohave, Chemehuevi, Hopi and Navajo.



ROBIN COOPER

establish regular personal exercise programs and how to eat, exercise and behave in a manner that will lead to longer, healthier lives.

One of Cooper's favorite experiences happened during a workshop when she had participants chase balloons around the room. "I looked over and saw an 80-year-old woman in a wheelchair having a blast," she says. As important as physical activity is to controlling and even preventing diabetes, having fun and relaxing is just as good for health. Cooper wanted participants to know that they could do simple things to keep active. It reinforces her belief in the creation of positive, healthy and lifelong habits. ❖



ROBIN COOPER

Contact

Robin Cooper
robincc@ag.arizona.edu