

EXTENSION CONNECTION - Lighten Up Iowa

By: Paulelda Gilbert, ISU Extension Nutrition & Health Specialist

Q. What is the progress of the Lighten Up Iowa contest that we heard so much about in January?

A. 19,319 people from all 99 Iowa counties and several other states are actively participating in Lighten Up Iowa in 2005 and tallying impressive numbers. A five-month program, Lighten Up Iowa encourages Iowans to change their lifestyles by developing healthy activity and eating habits. Participants can compete on teams in two categories: weight loss and/or accumulated activity. The program is running from January 19 to June 8.

At the mid-way point, the 1,950 teams who chose to participate in the weight loss division, lost 46,306 pounds. The teams competing in the activity division have accumulated 1,283,750 miles and with nicer weather ahead they anticipate reaching 2 million miles by the end of the program. During March, an additional part of the program asked participants to strive to eat at least 5 fruits and vegetables each day. Teams that achieved this goal were entered into a drawing for fruit and vegetable platters from Hy-Vee. Participants receive a weekly email message that provides nutrition tips and motivational ideas to stay active. Lighten Up Iowa officials are hopeful that the program encourages participants to improve nutritional habits and become more physically active.

Several communities and schools in North Central Iowa have taken on the Lighten Up Iowa program as a local project to improve the overall health of their citizens. Communities formed partnerships of businesses, local chamber offices, county public health departments, and County Extension Services to promote the local contests and provide additional incentives. This resulted in 89 teams in Lighten Up Fort Dodge, 85 teams in Lighten Up Humboldt County and 65 teams in the contest in Webster City.

There are also school teams in the area. The school contest called "Go the Distance" has 2 teams in Greene County, 5 teams at Prairie Valley Middle School and 21 teams at Robert Blue Middle School in Eagle Grove.

Creative names for teams, the challenge of competition between teams and the support of team members is what makes Lighten Up Iowa a fun and successful method of helping to "down-size" Iowans and improve their eating and physical activity habits. Comments from team participants include "Lighten Up Iowa has motivated me to get back in the gym". "The competition has made me keep on track so I don't let my team down".

Sixty per cent of lowans are obese or overweight. The healthcare costs for this epidemic are high and the time for making changes is now. Lighten Up Iowa is a program through the Iowa Games, Iowa Department of Public Health and Iowa State University Extension. For more information, check out www.lightenupiowa.org.

Call me at the Webster County Extension Office, 515-576-2119, or E-mail pgilbert@iastate.edu, with your nutrition and health questions. You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804 or visit the Webster County Extension web site: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/webster>.