

Just a little a day can lead to better health, wealth

by Marc_H._Morial

In 2003, the National Urban League undertook a more focused and aggressive approach to health issues in light of serious disparities in the physical well-being of blacks as compared to whites.

It stands to reason that a healthier community means a more prosperous community - one with fewer sick days, higher productivity and lower health care costs. So, it pays to take preventive steps to stave off major illness for as long as possible - not only in terms of physical but fiscal health as unforeseen medical expenses can wreak havoc on a family's bottom line, especially if uninsured as 19 percent of blacks are.

Even when you're covered, there's no guarantee that you won't be driven to the poor house by an unexpected medical emergency. According to a 2005 Harvard University study, 50 percent of bankruptcy filers - a majority (68 percent) with health insurance - attributed their situation to unforeseen medical crises. And the average out-of-pocket medical debt incurred by those who declared bankruptcy was roughly \$12,000, which is twice the average net worth of blacks.

This is an issue we cannot afford to ignore, especially in the black community, where rates of diabetes, heart disease and obesity are higher than in any other ethnic group. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, black women are roughly twice as likely to suffer from hypertension and to be overweight or obese than white women. Roughly half of blacks lead inactive lifestyles compared to 38 percent of whites, the CDC reports. And cancer is most likely to hit black men than any other ethnic group and gender, followed by white men.

If the black community continues down this road, we'll never be able to close the gap between us and mainstream America. That is why we need to get serious about becoming more active and eating better. That is not as difficult as you think. Incremental changes to your lifestyle - adding 2,000 more steps a day and cutting calories by 100 - can halt weight gain.

Back in 2006, the health nonprofit America on the Move joined with the Urban League to launch the Healthy Steps program to get more Americans, especially in communities of color, off the couch and into their walking shoes. We ended up taking the campaign to several cities and handed out pedometers to more than 4,000 families who ended up taking a total of 24 million steps.

Recently, AOM found that dancing is double the workout than is walking. So we banded together with PepsiCo, YMCA of the USA and the National Council of La Raza to help communities of color get their dance on.

Earlier this month at the McBurney YMCA in New York City borough of Manhattan, we kicked off the Smart Spot Dance! initiative, which will travel to six more cities in 2007, with Mario Lopez of Dancing with the Stars, LaChanze of the Broadway hit "The Color Purple" and veteran choreographer Maria Torres putting the crowd through a rigorous yet enjoyable dance routines - full of moves that can easily be done at home.

Busting a move is so much more than a leisure activity. It's also a great way to get fit and lose weight, which translates into an improved quality of life on so many levels - physical, spiritual and financial.

Given the current state of health of blacks nationwide, our community must take major steps now, not later, to ensure that we'll be around for our golden years ... if not for ourselves, for our children and their children.

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