

Poor face barriers in eating healthy diets

SEATTLE (AP) - Laurieann Cossey has always struggled with her weight. Four years ago, she was diagnosed with diabetes. Now, six months pregnant and struggling to get by, the single mother tries to make sure her 1-year-old son gets the fruits and vegetables he needs.

"I worry a lot about my son being obese," said Cossey, whose mother and grandmother also had diabetes.

Cossey, a 43-year-old

community college student, and her son, Andrew, survive on food stamps, trips to the food bank, and a state program for pregnant women and their children that provides essentials such as dairy products, fruit juice and cereal.

She knows they should both be eating more fruits and vegetables.

But the foods on the government's new food pyramid are too expensive. Boxed macaroni and cheese costs less than a dollar to feed

the whole family; a fresh chicken breast and steamed vegetables cost about \$2.60.

"I'm sure we'd all like to feed our children a nice healthy chicken breast and asparagus," she said on a visit to a vegetable market. "If we are low on fruits and vegetables, my child gets his first."

But pasta, canned vegetables and hamburger are much more likely to be on Cossey's table.

Scientists, doctors and government officials are

working on ways to get families like Cossey's to eat healthier food. Some innovative new programs are making progress, but the results are not coming fast enough as Americans get fatter and fatter. The poor have more barriers to dealing with obesity, eating healthy and leading an active life, said Dr. Lydia Tinajero-Deck said.

Fast food restaurants are more common in their neighborhoods than fresh produce markets. Many parents, sometimes working two jobs,

don't have the time to cook healthy meals. And fresh food is more costly.

"Energy-dense foods rich in starch, sugar or fat are the cheapest option for the consumer," said Adam Drewnowski, director of the Center for Public Health Nutrition at the University of Washington. "As long as the healthier lean meats, fish and fresh produce are more expensive, obesity will continue to be a problem for the working poor."

Dr. David L. Katz of Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center advocates vegetable subsidies. He favors the idea of a junk food tax that would use the money to lower the price of vegetables, as well as pay for anti-obesity programs.

Diana Crane, a spokeswoman for PCC Natural Markets in Seattle, argues that educated consumers can still find fresh food bargains. "Many types of produce remain very affordable, such as potatoes and many greens, many under \$1 per pound," she said. Crane said PCC would be happy to see more funding for government programs that get produce to low-income families.

Drewnowski is working

with a number of local agencies across Washington state to promote healthy eating and exercise by offering grants for promising projects.

He also argues for research to map the geographical distribution of obesity rates and spoke about obesity by Zip code at a conference over the summer. An "atlas of obesity" would help policymakers know where to focus their programs, he said.

Some areas are already battling obesity on a geographic basis. In Moses Lake, a rural town in eastern Washington with a high incidence of poverty, community agencies are working with citizen volunteers to improve walking trails; a community garden giving residents a place to grow their own fruits and vegetables.

Drewnowski says most diet trend and health suggestions are designed for the middle class.

A study his group is conducting seeks ways to make healthy eating more affordable. "We have enough information about which foods are healthy and which are not. But affordability and access — that's a different story," he told reporters.

Study training youth to pay attention

WASHINGTON (AP) - The use of special computer games to train their brains improved healthy youngsters' ability to pay attention, scientists reported Monday.

It's not clear just how much the games helped, other specialists cautioned. But with booming interest in developing therapies for attention problems, the research sheds light on how a normal youngster's brain pays attention in the first place.

At issue is "executive attention," the ability to tune out distractions and pay attention only to useful information.

The capacity develops between the ages of 3 and 7, said University of Oregon psychologist Michael Posner, who has studied cognitive development by measuring electrical signals from the brains of preschoolers and young children.

There's great individual variation among healthy children and adults, and problems with this particular attention-paying neural network may be one of many involved in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD.

Posner and colleagues at Cornell University's Weill Medical College wondered if it's possible to speed this network's normal development.

They adapted computer exercises used to train monkeys for space travel into games for 4- and 6-year-olds: For five days, the youngsters progressed from a game that moved a cat in and out of grass to more complex tasks, such as choosing the largest number amid deliberate distractions.

The researchers measured the children's brain activity with electroencephalographs and administered tests of attention and intelligence before and after the training; some children also underwent genetic testing.

The brains of the 6-year-olds showed significant changes after the computer training compared with untrained playmates who watched videos, Posner reported Monday in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

They were small improvements compared with the effect that simply getting older brings, Posner cautioned.

The 4-year-olds showed

little change.

There was a genetic effect: Children who were less outgoing and more controlled were better able to concentrate for their age and thus showed less effect from the training.

The study "significantly advances our understanding ... because it demonstrates that executive attention skills can be trained, or development accelerated, in young children," neuroscientists Karla Holmbie and Mark Johnson of the University of London's Centre for Brain & Cognitive Development wrote in an accompanying review.

But it's not clear if the training truly accelerated development — or merely made the children better at test-taking through practice, said Dr. Lisa Freund of the National Institutes of Health's child development branch.

"These kids may just be getting better at doing things in the lab," she cautioned, adding that brain training for any reason, especially attention problems, is in its infancy.

Posner echoed the cautions. "The fundamental

question is can we improve attention in preschool ages and can that be helpful," he said.

"We're a long way from the final answer to that, or even a good answer." Still, the study is important because it shows how healthy youngsters' brains work at different tasks at different ages.

"We've got to know normal before we can really understand what's abnormal," said NIH's Freund. "Especially with young children, there's such a wide range of normal behavior."

Expertise Student of the Month

Cosmetology student Vanessa Perez was recently chosen by her peers and instructors as their "Student of the Month." The 19 year-old, Eldorado High School graduate moved to Las Vegas from California four years ago. Since then, she's become a wife, mother and student. She has a two year-old daughter named Aaliyah. "It's been hard, but it's worth it, hair is my passion." While training, Perez suffered a wrist injury that forced her to stop using standard cosmetology tools for six weeks. However, because of her determination, Perez's instructors allowed her perform less strenuous training while recuperating. "The switch in training forced me to graduate later than expected, but that's OK. I doubt this would have happened anywhere else... The people who run this school are truly dedicated to helping each of their students succeed."

Perez plans to work in an area salon.



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UNICEF: Kids' deaths preventable

UNITED NATIONS (AP) - About 1.4 million children under age 5 die needlessly each year from measles, whooping cough and other diseases that are easily prevented by vaccines, the U.N. children's agency said in a report Thursday.

Major gains made in vaccinating the world's children during the 1980s have leveled off and donor nations must understand that progress to bring immunizations to those remaining will take renewed efforts and

more cash, said Dr. Peter Salama, UNICEF's chief of immunizations.

"Everybody thought that we were progressing so well that we would just progress continually," Salama said. "But in fact that didn't happen."

About 130 million children are born each year, and since 1990, about 70 percent have gotten the immunizations considered most vital. That's up from some 20 percent under the age of 1 in 1980.

But since then, there has not been great progress in reaching the final 20 or 30 percent who need help — mainly in poor countries — and those are the places that need the most urgent attention, UNICEF said.

Salama said about \$1 billion is now being spent on childhood immunization and about \$1 billion more is needed to reach a goal set in 2002 of bringing vaccines to at least 90 percent of children under the age of 1 around the world. (See UNICEF, Page 17)