

## NICE for a change

*Doctors create a safe place for teens to deal with weight problems*

By CATHLEEN F. CROWLEY, Staff writer  
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THE AIR pipe to Kristin Wagner's left lung is 80 percent closed, a condition she has had since birth. For Kristin, exercise is painful.

"She would run and just drop," said Pam Wagner, her mother.

Kristin put on extra weight as a young child and the pounds just kept coming. Classmates taunted her and called her names.

"I always knew that it didn't matter what other people said, but then I started believing them," Kristin said.

Her mom watched Kristin's confidence fade and the teenager withdrew into herself. The worse she felt, the more she ate. It was a cycle they didn't know how to break. Like other families struggling with weight problems, they didn't know what to do.

But earlier this year, Kristin's doctor suggested she try a new program sponsored by the Community Care Physicians. The NICE Weight Transitions Program was created to guide obese and seriously overweight teenagers toward healthier lifestyles before they develop chronic illnesses associated with being overweight.



*Kristin Wagner, left, with her health coach Denisa Hluchova, is using the NICE program to make a real change in her life, on Wednesday, March 24, 2010, in Latham. (Luanne M. Ferris / Times Union)*



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It's not a diet, it's not a weight-loss program and they don't use the word fat.

Designed by physicians within the practice, the teens learn about nutrition and talk to a behavioral therapist to better understand their relationship with food, and they work out in the gym with personal trainers.

"It's more of a lifestyle intervention," said Denisa Hluchova, program manager and health coach for NICE.

Community Care Physicians sees about 11,000 children and 3,000 of them are overweight or obese, said Alexis Musto, spokeswoman for the medical group. The numbers mirror state statistics that show about 20 percent of New York children are obese and another 10 percent are overweight. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, a 5 foot-tall, 13-year old boy would be considered overweight at 115 pounds and obese at 130 pounds. A 16-year-old girl who is 5 feet 3 inches tall would be considered overweight at 140 pounds and obese at 170.

Dr. Swatantra K. Mitta, a physician at Clifton Park Pediatrics, said some parents don't even see it.

"Especially when the parents are obese themselves, it's very hard to say there is something different or wrong here because that is what's normal for them," she said.

Mitta explains to them the health problems that come with obesity -- diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease -- and she gives the families nutrition and exercise ideas. Some of those patients never come back.

“It’s a very sensitive topic,” Mitta said.

Mitta hopes the NICE program will be a resource for her patients, so she sat through half of the NICE classes to make sure she was recommending something worthwhile.

During the first class, nobody wanted to be there, Hluchova said. Some of teens wouldn’t look up and they didn’t talk. By the end of the second session, they were chattering with each other and didn’t want to leave.

The staff turns up the music, puts on the TV and designs games to get the teenagers interested in exercise.

The teens meet two nights a week for two hours, including an hour spent in the gym during each session. They also are free to use the gym on Friday nights. The eight-week program costs \$360, but Community Care Physicians hopes to persuade insurance companies to cover the cost -- Kristin’s mom says it’s worth every penny.

NICE stands for nutrition, intelligence, confidence and energy, and Kristin was among the first eight teenagers to go through the program. They were invited by their doctors at Community Care Physicians, but starting with the next session, any teenager can participate.

The kids chose the words that they wanted the adults to use when talking about their weight problems. Instead of fat or obese, they settled on heavy and not fit.

“Those were very relaxing and comfortable words for all of them,” Hluchova said.



*In the foreground is Kristin Wagner, one of the teenagers in the first NICE Weight Transitions Program at Community Care Physicians, P.C., as she gets instruction from Kerry Burnett, a program director from Sonshine Fitness, Denisa Hluchova, her health coach, who is the program director for NICE, and Cindi Stone, Sonshine Fitness owner and director. (Luanne M. Ferris / Times Union)*

Image and self-esteem are tough issues for anyone dealing with weight problems, but teenagers are particularly sensitive. So the staff continually checked with the teenagers to see if they felt good about the classes, rather than burdened with new anxieties.

Kristin, a freshman psychology major at The College of Saint Rose, learned breathing techniques to help her exercise and found she liked the fitness ball and leg exercises. She learned to read nutrition labels and was surprised by what she found. One day she brought a bag of chips to class as a homework assignment. One of the ingredients was chicken fat.

“You really see what’s in the food and what you are eating,” she said. “Before, I was like, ‘Chips? Yeah, chips are good’ and I’d eat them.”

Now she scolds her mom in the supermarket when she reaches for sugary foods. Kristin has lost 13 pounds and joined a gym with her mom.

“She stands up straighter, she smiles more and she is just so much happier,” Pam Wagner said.

Mitta loved the spark she saw in the teenagers’ eyes.

“You are going to prevent diabetes, premature heart disease, hypertension, emotional problems, sleep apnea, you name it,” she said. “For a \$360 investment, the dividends are endless.”



*In the mirror in the center is Kristin Wagner as she gets instruction from Kerry Burnett, a program director from “Sonshine Fitness”, at right, and Cindi Stone, Sonshine Fitness owner and director. Sonshine Fitness contracts with Community Care Physicians to provide fitness training for the NICE program. (Luanne M. Ferris / Times Union)*

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For more information

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