**OBESITY 7/29/2021 B. SHEPHERD**

R/T: 30:00 O/C: “Thank you for listening.”

BROOKE SHEPHERD: One in three adults in Wisconsin is considered obese, according to the most recent data from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. For children in the state, the obesity rate is just under 14%. Obesity can increase a person’s risk for high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease and various other medical issues. Experts say that obesity is also associated with worse COVID-19 outcomes, due to a person’s weakened immune response.

MUSIC: “Fresh Lift” (fade under)

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Support for this broadcast comes from the Donovan E. Rasmussen Broadcast Journalism Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. This is Brooke Shepherd reporting.

MUSIC: “Fresh Lift” (fade under)

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Obesity in the United States has tripled since 1975, according to the World Health Organization. Though in recent years the obesity rate plateaued in Wisconsin, the long-term trends show it growing.

In this report, we look at what the experts think will happen to obesity rates since the pandemic, discussing the barriers the consumer now faces and why obesity is so prevalent. Finally, we will talk about stigma and solutions.

The experts are Kristin Miller, a dietician with Health Partners in Hudson; Barry Popkin, world renowned obesity expert and professor of nutrition at the University of North Carolina; Beth Olson, an associate professor and extension specialist in the nutritional sciences department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Greg Miller, a family physician in River Falls.

Our first expert is AZ Snyder, a public health official for Pierce County. Snyder has been with Pierce County for over three years. She says that trends in obesity for western Wisconsin are almost the same as national averages.

AZ SNYDER: OUR POPULATION IS DIVIDED INTO THIRDS. SO, ABOUT A THIRD OF PEOPLE ARE OF A HEALTHY BMI. A THIRD OF PEOPLE ARE OVERWEIGHT AND A THIRD OF PEOPLE ARE CLASSIFIED AS OBESE. SO, IT'S VERY, VERY SIMILAR IN ALL THOSE JURISDICTIONS. FOR PIERCE COUNTY, 35% OF OUR POPULATION IS OVERWEIGHT AND 32% IS OBESE, WHICH IS VERY CLOSE TO THE STATE AND COUNTY NUMBERS AS WELL. WE DEFINITELY HAVE SEEN FOR ALL THREE OF THOSE JURISDICTIONS, NATIONAL, STATE AND PIERCE COUNTY, WE'VE SEEN OBESITY INCREASED IN THE PAST DECADE PLUS. IN 2004, OUR OBESITY RATE IN THE U.S. , WISCONSIN AND IN PIERCE COUNTY WAS 24% AND NOW 32% IN PIERCE COUNTY. SO, WE HAVE SEEN A STEADY INCREASE IN THOSE NUMBERS.

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BROOKE SHEPHERD: Snyder refers to B-M-I or Body Mass Index. This is commonly used to classify overweight and obese individuals. A calculation is done comparing a person’s height and weight. Anyone scoring over 30 is considered obese and anything between 25 and 29.9 is overweight. Though Snyder does say that this is just a screening tool and not a diagnosis since B-M-I is not always 100% accurate.

Barry Popkin is an obesity researcher who founded the Division of Nutrition Epidemiology at University of North Carolina. He later established and led the U-N-C Interdisciplinary Obesity Center. He says that obesity can lead to many complications and has been affecting the military and all labor forces. He also mentions its connection with non-communicable diseases, or N-C-Ds.

BARRY POPKIN: WHAT WE KNOW FROM AN ARRAY OF DIFFERENT STUDIES IS THAT ITS IMPACT ON THE HEALTH SYSTEM IS PROFOUND. ITS INCREASES IN HEALTH INSURANCE, VERY MUCH RELATE TO NUTRITION RELATED NCDS LIKE DIABETES, HYPERTENSION, 13 OF THE 15 CANCERS, MANY OTHER ASPECTS OF N-C-DS. SO, THE IMPACT IS PROFOUND ON OUR ECONOMY IN TERMS OF PRODUCTIVITY. IT'S ALSO PROFOUND IN ITS IMPACTS ON THE MILITARY. THEY'RE HAVING TROUBLE FINDING HEALTHY PEOPLE TO RECRUIT. AND ONCE THEY GET IN, THEY'RE HAVING TROUBLE GREAT DIFFICULTY KEEPING THEIR TROOPS FIT BECAUSE OF THE WEIGHT GAINS.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: The coronavirus outbreak had to become a focal point of the Pierce County Public Health Department. Obesity and other pressing topics were put on hold temporarily.

AZ SNYDER: THE PANDEMIC HAS DEFINITELY OVERWHELMED THE CAPACITY OF LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENTS, BUT IT CERTAINLY HASN'T STOPPED OUR FOCUS ON OUR REALLY VITAL AREAS OF THE HEALTH OF THE PUBLIC. SO, WE ARE STILL IN PARTNERSHIP WITH HEALTHIER TOGETHER, WHICH IS OUR COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPROVEMENT COALITION FOCUSING ON MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER. AND THEN WE'VE KIND OF WRAPPED OBESITY INTO THOSE, ACKNOWLEDGING THAT OBESITY IS VERY MUCH RELATED TO MENTAL AND FAMILY STABILITY.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Studies have shown that people with obesity are more likely to become seriously ill after contracting the coronavirus. Snyder says this is true for all age groups, even young people.

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AZ SNYDER: PEOPLE WHO ARE OBESE, EVEN IF THEY'RE YOUNGER ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY THAN PEOPLE WHO ARE NORMAL WEIGHT TO BE HOSPITALIZED FOR COVID-19. WE ALSO KNOW THAT OBESITY REALLY DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTS MEMBERS OF CERTAIN RACIAL AND ETHNIC MINORITY POPULATIONS. SO THAT ALSO LETS US KNOW THAT THOSE PEOPLE FROM BOTH POPULATIONS, IF THEY ARE OBESE, WHICH THEY'RE MORE LIKELY TO BE ARE AT INCREASED RISK FOR POOR OUTCOMES DUE TO COVID-19. ANECDOTALLY AND KIND OF LOGICALLY, WE KNOW THAT PROBABLY THE PANDEMIC HAS INCREASED OBESITY, BUT TO BE HONEST, IT'S TOO EARLY FOR US TO HAVE REAL GOOD QUALITY QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE OF THAT. THE PANDEMIC IS NOT OVER YET. IT DOES MAKE SENSE THAT IN A PANDEMIC WHERE PEOPLE ARE STRESSED OUT, WE MIGHT BE AT HOME MORE, BUT I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT WHEN I'M AT HOME, I SNACK ALL DAY.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Obesity and overweight were named covid risk factors by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or C-D-C. Popkin says obesity causes people to be immune compromised due to the added weight on their bodies. In addition, the studies that have been done so far are finding obesity rates are rising since the start of the pandemic.

BARRY POPKIN: THERE IS MORE RESEARCH THAN YOU COULD IMAGINE. AND, AND CLEARLY NOT ONLY IN THE U-S BUT IN ITALY, FRANCE WITH STUDIES IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES, WE KNOW OVERWEIGHT, AND OBESITY HAS INCREASED ACROSS THE BOARD. WE ALSO KNOW OF COURSE, MANY COUNTRIES, INCLUDING OUR OWN THAT FOOD INSECURITY HAS GONE UP, BUT OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY HAVE GONE UP. I WOULD ESTIMATE IN THE U.S. BY AN AVERAGE BETWEEN FIVE AND 12 POUNDS. WE DON'T HAVE THE EXACT DATA, BUT WE HAVE DATA LIKE THAT FROM A NUMBER OF SMALL STUDIES IN OTHER COUNTRIES.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Kristin Miller is a dietician from the Hudson Hospital and Clinic in St. Croix County. She has been a dietician for almost 14 years. Miller says it’s hard to make specific conclusions about how much obesity has gone up due to the pandemic. She has seen mixed results in her own patients.

KRISTIN MILLER: I THINK AS A WHOLE IN PATIENTS THAT I'VE BEEN SEEING, I'M WORKING WITH ON BOTH, BOTH OUTPATIENT AND INPATIENT SIDE, THEY'VE BEEN REPORTING WEIGHT GAIN. A LOT OF PATIENTS HAVE IN A VARIETY OF LIKE, OH, I'VE GAINED A COUPLE POUNDS OR A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE LIKE THE FRESHMEN 15 OF COLLEGE THEY'VE GAINED THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND TALKED ABOUT THAT AS WELL. SO I THINK IT KIND OF VARIES. KIND OF THE OTHER SIDE, I HAVE HAD SOME PATIENTS, WHICH IS REALLY INTERESTING, ACTUALLY TALK ABOUT SOME HEALTHIER HABITS THAT THEY'VE MADE DURING THE PANDEMIC AND THAT THEY'VE ACTUALLY LOST WEIGHT, WHICH WAS KIND OF INTERESTING TO ME. MAYBE BECAUSE THEY WERE GOING OUT REGULARLY WITH LIKE FRIENDS OR LIKE COFFEE OR OUT TO EAT AND BY CUTTING OUT THOSE BEHAVIORS OF NOT EATING OUT AS MUCH, THEY ACTUALLY HAD SOME WEIGHT LOSS GOING ON.

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BROOKE SHEPHERD: In a recent study published in the journal of the American Medical Association, it was found that higher daily step count, regardless of how much someone walks, is associated with lower mortality risk from all causes.

KRISTIN MILLER: ONE OF THE BIGGEST THINGS THAT I SEE IS, JUST WORKING MORE FROM HOME FOR A LOT OF US, AND I KNOW FOR MYSELF, EVEN PERSONALLY, WHEN WE WERE WORKING FROM HOME, YOU JUST DIDN'T MOVE AS MUCH. I WENT FROM MY BEDROOM TO MY KITCHEN TABLE, MAYBE TO THE BATHROOM. AND THAT'S ALL A MATTER OF, NOT VERY MANY STEPS. VERSUS WHEN YOU'RE AT WORK, YOU'RE CONSTANTLY ON YOUR FEET MOVING TO SEE PATIENTS. AND I THINK THAT CAN BE TRUE FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE, IS THAT THEY'RE JUST MORE ACTIVE AT WORK. THEY'RE WALKING INTO THE OFFICE, MAYBE INSTEAD OF SITTING AT THEIR DESK, EMAILING OR MESSAGING PEOPLE, THEY'RE GETTING UP AND TALKING TO THOSE PEOPLE, OR EVEN WHEN WE THINK ABOUT, LIKE LUNCH BREAKS THAT MAY, WE'RE GOING TO A CAFETERIA AND WE'RE EATING WITH SOMEONE ELSE, THEN WHEN WE'RE AT HOME, WE TEND TO SNACK MORE MINDLESSLY.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Miller says that stress eating is also happening a lot, as many people felt they had little control over what was going on in their environment.

KRISTIN MILLER: FOOD WAS ONE THING THAT WE COULD KIND OF CONTROL OVER AND MAKE CHOICES WITH. AND SO I THINK FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT LED TO SOME UNHEALTHY CHOICES, MAYBE INCREASE IN SNACKING OR IN THE TIMING OF SNACKING OR MAYBE INCREASE IN SWEETS BECAUSE I THINK A LOT OF US TEND TO GO TOWARDS THOSE THINGS AS COMFORT KIND OF FOODS TOO.KIND OF ALONG WITH THAT, I THINK A LOT OF PEOPLE USE FITNESS CENTERS TO GO TO WORK AT WORK OUT AT. AND I THINK WITH THOSE BEING CLOSED, OR I KNOW DURING THE HIGHER RATES OF COVID-19 IN A PANDEMIC, A LOT OF PEOPLE OR FITNESS CENTERS WERE REQUIRING MASKS AND I THINK THAT REALLY HAMPERED PEOPLE FROM WANTING TO GO AND WORK OUT AT FITNESS CENTERS, HAVING TO BE MASKED. THEY PERCEIVED THAT AS BEING DIFFICULT FOR THEM. AND SO THEN MAYBE THEY CHOSE NOT TO WORK OUT OR ON THE SAME TIMELINE. A LOT OF FITNESS CENTERS WERE CLOSED DURING THE PANDEMIC, SO IF THAT WAS THEIR OUTLET FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY THAT WAS ELIMINATED.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: In children, obesity is associated with heart problems, psychological effects, and many other issues. During the pandemic, children faced uncertainties and stress. With their screen time going up and their time to be physically active going down. They no longer left home much in many cases and found new challenges. Beth Olson is an associate professor of nutrition at UW-Madison. She says the pandemic’s impact on rates of childhood obesity is not yet known.

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BETH OLSON: I'VE SEEN A COUPLE OF SMALL REPORTS WHERE, FOR INSTANCE, IN A CLINIC WHERE THEY FEEL THAT THEY ARE SEEING CHILDREN, YOU KNOW, ONE YEAR TO THE NEXT YEAR THAT THEY'RE SEEING, ARE AT A HIGHER PERCENTILE THAN THEY WERE, SUGGESTING THAT THERE'S BEEN WEIGHT GAIN. I THINK WHAT MANY ARE SUGGESTING IS SOME OF THE THINGS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO WEIGHT GAIN, EXCESSIVE WEIGHT GAIN IN CHILDREN, HAPPENED DURING COVID. SO, BEING OUT OF SCHOOL FOR INSTANCE, THERE IS SOMETIMES MORE WEIGHT GAIN IN THE SUMMER WHEN CHILDREN ARE OUT OF SCHOOL. SO BEING OUT OF SCHOOL WHERE THEY MAY LACK STRUCTURED ACTIVITY, AS IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES, THEY MAY LACK SOME OPPORTUNITY FOR JUST UNSTRUCTURED PLAY, LIKE FOR SMALLER CHILDREN, RECESSES PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT, OTHER KIDS TO PLAY WITH. AND THE OTHER THING IS OUR SCHOOLS PROVIDE MANY, MANY, MANY CHILDREN WITH HEALTHY BREAKFAST AND HEALTHY LUNCHES.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Olson says the working from home environment can lead to issues for many children when it comes to weight.

BETH OLSON: THEN THE CONCERN THAT THERE WERE MORE CHILDREN SPENDING TIME ON SCREENS. IF YOU THINK, YOU KNOW, IF YOU'RE DOING ONLINE SCHOOLING FOR SOME SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF TIME, YOU'RE NOT WALKING BACK AND FORTH TO YOUR CLASSES OR AMONG CLASSES SAY IN A HIGH SCHOOL, YOU'RE SITTING BETWEEN YOUR CLASSES, PERHAPS. CHILDREN MAYBE BEING ON THEIR SCREENS LATER AT NIGHT, JUST MORE IN, IN GENERAL AND THEN NOT JUST FOR CHILDREN, BUT ADULTS WORKING AT HOME, HAVING MORE ACCESS TO FOOD ALL THE TIME. SO A KITCHEN THERE WITH FOOD IN IT, AS OPPOSED TO BEING IN YOUR CLASSROOM WHERE THERE WOULDN'T BE THAT KIND OF TEMPTATION OR A WAY OF COPING WITH BOREDOM, PERHAPS, BY EATING, YOU KNOW, GOING TO THE KITCHEN TO GET FOOD TO EAT.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: A 2019 report from the American Academy of Pediatrics found that children aged 8-12 spent an average of 4-5 hours a day on screens, while teens aged 13-18 spent 6.5 hours a day. The pandemic only increased the need for digital tools.

BETH OLSON: I DON'T THINK WE'LL HAVE A GOOD HANDLE ON IT FOR A WHILE YET, BECAUSE TO KIND OF GET A GOOD HANDLE, WE DO NATIONWIDE SURVEYS AND THOSE, IT TAKES SOME TIME TO DO THAT. AND THEN WE DO COMPARISONS OVER TIME BECAUSE OF COURSE EVERY CHILD THAT'S GROWING NORMALLY WOULD BE GAINING WEIGHT. SO, YOU CAN'T JUST LOOK AT GAIN BECAUSE A CHILD IS GROWING, THEY'RE GOING TO GAIN WEIGHT. SO WE REALLY NEED TO LOOK AT HOW DOES IT COMPARE TO PREVIOUS YEARS OF CHILDREN AT THAT SAME AGE?

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Olson says things have changed since when she started in the field. In the past, children weren’t considered to be overweight or obese since the thought was they’d grow into their bodies.

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BETH OLSON: BUT OVER TIME, WE FOUND CHILDREN WERE BECOMING SO OVERWEIGHT AND OBESE THAT THEY, WE WERE RUNNING OUT OF TIME FOR THEM TO GROW INTO IT. IN OTHER WORDS, THEY WERE STARTING TO HIT WEIGHTS THAT THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN AS ADULTS. OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY TENDS TO TRACK. SO IT'S NOT INEVITABLE THAT A CHILD WHO IS HEAVIER IS GOING TO BE A HEAVIER ADULT, BUT IT IS MORE LIKELY. AND THE RAMIFICATIONS ON HEALTH BEING OVERWEIGHT AND OBESE THAT WE USED TO SEE MORE OFTEN IN ADULTHOOD, THINGS LIKE SLEEP APNEA, WHICH DO PREDISPOSE PEOPLE TO HEART DISEASE, HEART PROBLEMS, HEART HIGH BLOOD LIPIDS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO HEART DISEASE, CANCERS, THOSE KINDS OF THINGS ARE SHOWING UP IN CHILDHOOD, CHILDREN WITH ABNORMAL BLOOD LIPIDS, CHILDREN WITH SLEEP APNEA, THOSE KINDS OF RISK FACTORS. ALSO TYPE TWO DIABETES, THIS WAS A DISEASE WE USED TO CALL ADULT ONSET BECAUSE IT WAS MORE LIKELY TO HAPPEN TO WHEN YOU ARE OLDER AND WE'VE RENAMED IT TO TYPE TWO, BECAUSE NOW IT'S HAPPENING. TO CHILDREN IN A, IN A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN THAT IS, IS OVERWEIGHT OR OBESITY.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Olson says that if there were more programs available community-wide, parents could have access to more support and advice. She says preventing obesity in children can start during pregnancy.

BETH OLSON: SO IF WE CAN GET SUPPORT WHEN THEY'RE PREGNANT AND CONTINUING TO BREASTFEED, BREASTFED BABIES TEND TO HAVE BETTER WEIGHT OUTCOMES. THAT'S, AGAIN, NOT AN ABSOLUTE, PLENTY OF BABIES WHO HAVE FED FORMULA WHO HAVE BEEN HEALTHY AND, AND HAVE GOOD WEIGHTS, BUT THAT'S A START. AND THEN A CONCEPT WHICH ISN'T ALWAYS EASY TO GRASP. AND SO PEOPLE NEED HELP ON THE STEPS ALONG THE WAY IS SOMETHING WE CALL RESPONSIVE FEEDING, WHICH IS WE FEEL THAT BABIES BORN WITH A GOOD SENSE OF WHEN THEY'RE HUNGRY AND A GOOD SENSE OF WHEN THEY'RE FULL. AND IF THEY ARE OFFERED HEALTHY FOODS, YOU KNOW, BREASTFED, OR IF THEY ARE FORMULA FED, IF, IF MOM WILL, OR CAREGIVER HOLDS THE BOTTLE AND WATCHES THE BABY'S RESPONSES, BUT THEN ALSO WHEN THEY MOVE ON TO SOLID FOODS, IF THEY'RE OFFERED THOSE FOODS AND ALLOWED TO EAT THEM, AND THEN WHEN THEY DECIDE THEY'RE DONE EATING, WE STOP FEEDING THEM, THEY’RE MORE LIKELY TO DEVELOP EATING DRIVEN BY HUNGER AND FULLNESS AND NOT OTHER THINGS.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: So, why are obesity rates continuing to rise? Popkin says the food industry is partly to blame.

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BARRY POPKIN: OUR FOOD SUPPLY HAS REALLY PUSHED THAT KIND OF UNHEALTHY, HIGHLY PROCESSED FOODS AND BEVERAGES, THE FAST FOODS AND OTHER KINDS OF THINGS WE TAKE IN, AS WELL AS ALL THE READY TO HEAT READY THEMED FOODS THAT WE BUY IN GROCERY STORES. COOKING IN THE AVERAGE IN THE U.S., I DON'T KNOW DATA EXACTLY FOR WISCONSIN, BUT I WOULDN'T THINK IT'S THAT DIFFERENT, PEOPLE SPEND 30 TO 40 MINUTES ON THE AVERAGE IN FOOD PREPARATION A DAY. THAT'S THE AVERAGE. NOW OF COURSE THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE THAT COOK AND STUFF AND EAT REAL FOOD LIKE I DO, BUT ON THE AVERAGE, THAT'S REALLY WHAT WE ARE DOING TODAY. WE'VE SHIFTED IN EVERY ASPECT OF HOW WE THINK ABOUT FOOD AND HOW WE EAT IT AND PREPARE IT.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: St. Croix and Pierce County were top ranked in the state for health outcomes in 2020 according to the Wisconsin County Health Rankings report. Snyder says that even in economically stable areas, there are other factors that contribute to obesity.

AZ SNYDER: THERE’S NO DOUBT PIERCE AND ST. CROIX COUNTY ARE AMONG THE HEALTHIEST COUNTIES IN THE STATE. AND THAT IS VERY MUCH DUE TO OUR VERY STRONG SOCIOECONOMIC STANDING AS COUNTIES. THAT'S NO QUESTION ABOUT THAT. I WOULDN'T SAY OUR OBESITY RATE IS SO HIGH COMPARED TO POOR COMMUNITIES. SO I, I WOULDN'T SAY THAT, I WOULD SAY HOWEVER THAT FOR INSTANCE, PIERCE COUNTY IS A VERY COMMUTING COUNTY. SO I BELIEVE WE HAVE THE HIGHEST RATE OF PEOPLE WHO LEAVE THE COUNTY TO GO TO WORK EVERY DAY OF ANY COUNTY IN WISCONSIN. THAT'S THE LAST TIME I CHECKED; IT'S BEEN A COUPLE OF YEARS SINCE I LOOKED AT THAT DATA. WHEN WE COMMUTE LIKE THAT, THERE'S LESS TIME THAT WE HAVE TO BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE IN OUR COMMUNITIES AND TO GO TO THE GYM, TO GO FOR A WALK BECAUSE YOU'RE SPENDING TIME IN YOUR VEHICLE, THAT COULD POTENTIALLY BE A REASON WHY PIERCE COUNTY SPECIFICALLY MIGHT NOT HAVE THE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OPPORTUNITIES THAT OTHER COMMUNITIES MIGHT HAVE.

BROOKE SHEPHRD: The U.S. spends $3.8 trillion a year on health care according to the Federal government’s centers for Medicare and Medicaid services. Data shows that the US. Spends more per capita than any other industrialized nation, and yet better health outcomes are not obtained, according to a report by the Hamilton Project.

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BARRY POPKIN: IF WE HAD A DIFFERENT KIND OF HEALTH INSURANCE THAT FOCUSED ON WELLNESS RATHER THAN TREATMENT OF ILLNESS, AND IT WOULD BE DIFFERENT, BUT WE HAVE AN ENORMOUS ARRAY OF DOCTORS EVEN WHO ARE MAKING A LOT OF MONEY BY TREATING ALL THE CONSEQUENCES OF OBESITY. WE'RE IN A VERY COMPLEX SITUATION. WE NEED TO ACT. OTHER COUNTRIES, GOSH, THE UNITED KINGDOM PUT IN A SERIES OF TAXES ON SUGAR AND BEVERAGES, PUTTING IN A MARKETING BAN THAT TO PUT WARNING LABELS ON FOOD. THEY'RE DOING LOTS OF THINGS TO DEAL WITH THE UNHEALTHY FOOD, GET IT OUT OF THEIR COUNTRY. AND THIS HAPPENED AFTER BORIS JOHNSON WAS AT HIGH RISK OF DEATH, JUST LIKE DONALD TRUMP WAS, ALTHOUGH HE DIDN’T ADMIT IT, FROM COVID PLUS HIS OBESITY.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Popkin says in the U.S., many politicians are profiting off of the sugary beverage and food industry, making it a layered issue to address. In the medical community, there has been much debate on the growing interest in collecting data as a way of assessing treatment outcomes.

With all this pushback from billion-dollar industries, one might wonder if there is any way to combat obesity? And there is. Kristin Miller says that Health Partners offers a variety of classes for patients to aid with losing weight.

KRISTIN MILLER: WE HAVE ONE CALLED HEALTHY WEIGHT FOR LIFE AND THAT'S LIKE A LITTLE SHORTER PERIOD CLASS, A THREE-PART CLASS, WHICH IS A REALLY NICE OPTION FOR PEOPLE. BUT WE ALSO OFFER ONE CALLED LIFESTEPS AND THAT'S A YEAR LONG CLASS TAUGHT BY A NUTRITION PROFESSIONAL OR DIETICIAN LIKE MYSELF AND WE WORK WITH THE GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS FOR THE COURSE OF A YEAR TO HELP THEM TO ACHIEVE LONG-TERM WEIGHT LOSS AND THAT GOAL OF WORKING TOGETHER WITH NOT ONLY THEIR OTHER CLASSMATES, BUT ALSO HAVING THE SUPPORT OF A DIETICIAN THROUGH THAT CLASS IS SO BENEFICIAL FOR THEM. AND WHEN WE'RE TALKING ABOUT WEIGHT LOSS, LIKE I HAD SAID, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT LONG-TERM BEHAVIOR CHANGES. AND SO THAT LIFESTEPS CLASS REALLY SPEAKS TO THAT BECAUSE IT IS FOR THAT WHOLE YEAR. AND IT'S REALLY ABOUT TEACHING PEOPLE THOSE SMALL BEHAVIOR CHANGES THAT WE CAN DO TO REALLY MAKE GOOD LONG-TERM HEALTH CHANGES FOR OUR BODY.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: There are many things people can do at the individual level to stay healthy, though Snyder says we also need to look at larger scale solutions.

AZ SNYDER: I THINK MUCH OF PAST INTERVENTIONS AROUND THE COUNTRY RELATED TO OBESITY WERE REALLY VERY MUCH FOCUSED ON SINGLE INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR OWN BEHAVIOR. AND WE'VE COME TO REALIZE AS A PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNITY, THAT'LL BE, OBESITY IS VERY MUCH RELATED TO THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH PEOPLE LIVE. SO WHAT THE EVIDENCE IS TELLING US THAT THE SOLUTION TO POPULATION WIDE OBESITY, WHICH IS DEFINITELY WHAT WE'RE LOOKING AT IN THE UNITED STATES IS MAKING THE HEALTHY CHOICE, THE EASY CHOICE. AND THAT'S ALL ABOUT THAT ENVIRONMENT.

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BROOKE SHEPHERD: Snyder says the community could build the environment that supports access to quality and affordable food by adding more grocery stores and incentivizing the stores to carry healthy options.

AZ SNYDER: HOW DO WE MAKE SURE THAT OUR COMMUNITIES ARE BUILT IN A WAY WHERE THERE IS ACCESS TO SAFE, AN EASY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY. SO IF YOU LIVE IN A NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE, YOU KNOW, THERE IS GLASS ALL OVER THE STREET FROM BROKEN WINDOWS AND BEER BOTTLES, AND YOU'RE NOT QUITE SURE IF IT'S GOING TO BE SAFE TO GO OUT THERE FOR A RUN, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO GO OUT THERE AND GO FOR A RUN. YOU'RE NOT GOING TO GO TO THE PARK AND PLAY. BUT IF WE ARE THE COMMUNITIES WHERE WE KNOW WE HAVE SAFE GREEN SPACES THAT ARE RIGHT FOR EXERCISE, PEOPLE ARE GOING TO GET OUT THERE AND BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE. SO IT'S REALLY ABOUT THAT COMMUNITY INVESTMENT. NOW THAT'S TOUGH INTERVENTION TO IMPLEMENT. THAT'S EXPENSIVE. IT INVOLVES A LOT OF PARTNERS THAT MAYBE TRADITIONALLY WE WOULDN'T HAVE THOUGHT OF AS BEING PARTNERS IN COMBATING OBESITY, BUT THAT IS THE CASE. THESE DAYS THAT PUBLIC SAFETY, PUBLIC WORKS, PARKS AND REC, OUR MUNICIPALITIES. THEY ARE KEY PARTNERS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH TO REALLY INCREASE ACCESS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITIOUS FOOD.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: In Pierce County, Snyder says that the hospitals in the area have started building walking trails around them.

AZ SNYDER: THERE’S A GROUP IN ELLSWORTH THAT'S WORKING ON KIND OF BEAUTIFYING MAIN STREET IN DOWNTOWN TO MAKE A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE KIND OF WANT TO WALK AROUND AND BE OUTSIDE AND BE ACTIVE. THERE ARE SUMMER FUN EVENTS COMING UP IN ELLSWORTH THAT ARE REALLY PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS. SO YEAH, THAT STUFF IS DEFINITELY HAPPENING, I WOULDN'T SAY THAT WE'VE NECESSARILY GOTTEN TO THE PLACE WHERE WE'RE DOING BUILT ENVIRONMENT ASSESSMENT, TO UNDERSTAND IN ALL OF OUR COMMUNITIES WHERE THERE MIGHT BE SOME ISSUES WITH ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OPPORTUNITIES, BUT I THINK WE'RE HEADED IN THAT DIRECTION.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Popkin says what the U.S. needs is federal attention on combating obesity. He suggests adding warning labels to certain foods and modifying the marketing of unhealthy foods to children.

BARRY POPKIN: WE CAN GET THE SCHOOLS TO NOT ALLOW IT ANY LEVEL OF SUGARY BEVERAGES OR MARKETING OR SALES OF ANY KIND OF JUNK FOOD. WE CAN HAVE SCHOOLS PROVIDE AND BAN ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS FROM SCHOOLS. RIGHT NOW, WE HAVE HUGE COMPANIES LIKE MARRIOTT AND OTHERS GOING IN AND PROVIDING FOR SCHOOLS, CENTRALIZED, HIGHLY PROCESSED FOOD. GIVING THEM PIZZA AND STUFF WEEKLY OR LESS OFTEN, BUT THEY GIVE THEM ALSO TO HIGHLY PROCESSED FOOD INSTEAD OF REAL FOOD COOKED IN SCHOOLS LIKE WE USED TO HAVE. SO MAYBE WE NEED TO COME BACK TO SCHOOL, KITCHEN.

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BROOKE SHEPHERD: Popkin has helped pass legislation in many countries to change marketing and put more barriers in place from unhealthy choices. In Chile, Popkin’s colleagues passed a marketing ban on all media going to children for products that were unhealthy, containing high amounts of added sugar, sodium and saturated fats. Kids weren’t even allowed to bring these types of food into the school. Popkin says Chile was the highest sugary beverage consumer in the world.

BARRY POPKIN: THE REDUCTION WAS, FOR EXAMPLE, IN JUST THE FIRST YEAR WITH THE LEAST STRINGENT CUTOFF FOR THE WARNING LABEL FOODS THEY SAW, 24.7% REDUCTION IN SUGAR BEVERAGE CONSUMPTION PER CAPITA. THEY SAW LARGE DECLINES IN ADS THAT'S GOING TO KIDS. THEY SAW THE ADS MOVING TO THE PARENTS SHOW THE KIDS SAW. SO THEY THEN INCREASED THE BAND FROM 6:00 AM TO 10:00 PM ON ANY ADS, ANYWHERE BILLBOARDS, ET CETERA, BEING SEEN.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Popkin says the United Kingdom is also planning on taking similar measures.

BARRY POPKIN: THEY, THEY JUST ARE TRYING VERY HARD TO USE A SET OF MUTUALLY REINFORCING LAWS, THE WARNING LABELS AND ARE USED SCHOOLS AS WELL AS ON EVERY PRODUCT YOU BUY IN THE SUPERMARKET THAT ARE ALSO, DON'T ALLOW YOU TO ADVERTISE. THEY'RE NOW CONSIDERING A TAX AND ALL THESE FOODS AND BEVERAGES. SO THEY'RE TRYING TO GET RID OF THE HIGHLY PROCESSED FOOD, WHICH NOW DOZENS OF STUDIES, SEVERAL VERY SOPHISTICATED. N I H AND OTHER CONTROLLED TRIALS HAVE SHOWN, HAVE PRODUCED A HUGE INCREASE IN WEIGHT, A HUGE RISK ON ALL OF OUR HEART CONDITIONS AND IN SEVERAL CANCERS, AS WELL AS TOTAL MORTALITY, HEART DISEASE, MORTALITY AND CANCER MORTALITY. SO WE'VE GOT TO GET THESE FOODS ON THE RIGHT DIET. AND TODAY, 70% OF WHAT CHILDREN IN AMERICANS EAT IS JUNK FOOD, LITERALLY, 65, 70% OF WHAT ADULTS EAT IS ALSO. WE ARE REALLY A SOCIETY CONSUMING, UNHEALTHY FOOD AND FOOD IS KILLING US.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Greg Miller is a family physician in River Falls, Wisconsin. Dr. Miller has been practicing for over two decades and has worked with many patients with obesity. Miller says there are a lot of fad diets that people often can follow to lose weight, but he says people must find something that will work long-term.

GREG MILLER: EVERYBODY’S DONE SOMETHING DIFFERENT, THERE'S DIETS OUT THERE. DO I DO A HIGH CARB, LOW CARB, HIGH FAT, LOW FAT, HIGH PROTEIN. I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU DO. DO SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN DO AND THAT YOU CAN SUSTAIN. MOST OF THOSE DIETS OR FAD DIETS, BECAUSE NOBODY CAN KEEP THEM. AND WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM THIS IS YOU NEED A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE FOCUS ON A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE. BECAUSE LIKE WE SAID BEFORE, IF YOU DON'T LEARN WHAT GOT YOU OBESE, YOU'RE NEVER GOING TO BECOME, NOT OBESE.

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BROOKE SHEPHERD: Dr. Miller says the most important thing he can do in medicine is help people lose weight. The National Weight Control Registry is a long-term research project based at Brown medical School in Rhode Island. It has over 10,000 members and tracks people’s weight loss. 98% of Registry participants reported that they modified their food intake in some way to lose weight. The N-W-C-R says that long-term weight-loss maintenance is possible and requires sustained changes to a person’s behavior.

Another layer to the issue of obesity is something called obesity stigma. According to the World Health Organization, the stigma involves exclusion and marginalization that leads to inequities. People who are overweight may face discrimination in the workplace or school setting. Popkin says often people don’t look at the bigger picture and instead judge others.

BARRY POPKIN: IT’S A VERY DIFFICULT ISSUE IN OUR SOCIETY. YOUNG CHILDREN ARE POINTED OUT AND MADE FUN OF IF THEY’RE TOO HEAVY. ADULTS THAT ARE VERY OVERWEIGHT, THE SEVERELY OVERWEIGHT AND OBESE ADULTS ARE LOOKED AT POORLY AND THEY FEEL IT FEEL THE STIGMA. WE HAVE TO THINK OF INDIVIDUALS OBESITY AS A FUNCTION AND CREATED BY OUR HORRIBLE ENVIRONMENT, WHICH HAS SHOWN FOOD WHEREVER YOU MOVE, IT SELLS AT EVERY PLACE. IT'S EASY, IT'S SEDUCTIVE, IT'S HIGHLY PALATABLE. IT'S NOT REAL FOOD. IT’S THESE PLANT THESE REALLY CHEMICAL AND PLANT LIKE KIND OF FOODS THAT ARE NOT FULLY REAL FOODS, EVEN THOUGH WE THINK THEY ARE, YOU’D BE SHOCKED HOW MANY CHEMICALS AND SMELLS AND ADDITIVES ARE ADDED TO WHAT AMERICANS EAT. YES, IT'S A PROBLEM FOR INDIVIDUALS, PARTICULARLY WITH SEVERE OBESITY, BUT I DON'T LOOK AT IT AS THERE CAUSE I DON'T LOOK AT IT AS, BECAUSE THEY'RE LAZY. I LOOK AT IT WHAT SOCIETY HAS DONE WITH OUR CHILDREN INCREASINGLY BECOMING OVERWEIGHT AND OBESE AND THEN BEING SENT OFF TO A LIFE OF THAT.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: Dietician Kristin Miller says there are many instances where people with obesity may feel the stigma.

KRISTIN MILLER: I HAVE HEARD THAT SOME PATIENTS THAT I WORK WITH THAT, THAT GOING TO LIKE A FITNESS CENTER CAN BE A STRUGGLE FOR THEM. CAUSE IT'S INTIMIDATING, THERE'S PEOPLE THERE THAT MAYBE ARE CONSIDERED WHAT THEY WOULD CONSIDER MORE FIT OR AT A LOWER BMI THAT THEY WOULD THINK WOULD BE HEALTHIER AND KIND OF GETTING OVER THAT HURDLE OF STARTING SOME KIND OF PHYSICAL FITNESS CAN BE HARD FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: The pandemic may have contributed to the issue of obesity in western Wisconsin. Experts also found that those who already struggled with obesity were more likely to have poor health outcomes from COVID. The reason for this growing problem is complex and will take many resources to remedy the situation. Popkin says obesity is a slow killer.

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BARRY POPKIN: OBESITY DOESN'T KILL LIKE CANCER, IT DEBILITATES YOU. IT RAISES THE COST FOR INDUSTRY. PEOPLE ARE REDUCED PRODUCTIVITY AT WORK. THEY HAVE HIGHER ABSENTEEISM; THEY GET DISABLED MORE QUICKLY AND THEY RETIRE QUICKER, AND IT INCREASES OUR COSTS FOR NURSING HOMES AND OTHER THINGS. SO THERE'S MANY REASONS WHY WE SHOULD MOVE ON THIS PROBLEM, BUT IT REALLY TAKES A GOVERNMENT FOCUS. AND RIGHT NOW OUR FOCUS IS ON GETTING OUR ECONOMY, MOVING AND DEALING WITH A LOT OF OTHER EXISTENTIAL CRISIS, LIKE CLIMATE CHANGE.

BROOKE SHEPHERD: For more background on the problem of obesity in the United States, visit the website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at C-D-C dot gov forward slash obesity.

This has been a production of the Department of Communication and Media Studies at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. Reporting has been supported by the Donovan E. Rasmussen Broadcast Journalism Fellowship. The music is Fresh Lift by Shane Ivers

I’m Brooke Shepherd. Thank you for listening.

MUSIC: “Fresh Lift” to 30:00-minute mark (fade out)

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