

Preventing Diabetes in NM

Classes help people develop healthy habits



Ophelia Mace didn't know much about diabetes when she enrolled in the Native Lifestyles Balance Program. She didn't realize her genetics played a role in her risk for developing the chronic disease; her dad has diabetes and, as a Native American, she has a higher chance of having type 2 diabetes than any other racial group in the United States.

Throughout the year-long program, Mace, who grew up in a Navajo community near Cuba, learned comprehensive information about the disease as well as strategies for eating healthy and incorporating more physical activity into her life. "I thought, why doesn't everyone take advantage of this? It's even free," she said two years later and still maintaining her 27-pound weight loss. "I was excited to learn more. It motivated me to get back into being healthier – a journey that I'm still taking."

Mace, 40, can share her knowledge with others as a trainer for the program offered through the New Mexico Department of Health's Diabetes Prevention and Control Program to reduce the burden of type 2 diabetes and its complications. Diabetes is the sixth leading cause of death for adults in New Mexico, and the Department estimates 220,000 New Mexicans live with the disease.

"I think the strongest impact is to have people within the community own the program and to create champions who become trained to be lifestyle coaches," said Dianne Christensen, who co-facilitated Mace's group at the rural To'hajiilee Reservation, also called Cañoncito, 40 miles west of Albuquerque.

New Mexico offers evidence-based programs that can help people cut their risk of type 2 diabetes in half.

Designed for Native Americans, the Native Lifestyles Balance Program is an adapted version of the National Diabetes Prevention Program, created in 2010 to address the increasing burden of prediabetes and type 2 diabetes in the

United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Participants must be pre-diabetic (higher than normal blood-sugar level) or at risk of becoming diabetic.

"It is the proven intervention for either preventing or delaying diabetes," said Judith Gabriele, who oversees the Department's programs that focus on chronic diseases.

Trained lifestyle coaches guide people through CDC-approved curricula, helping them establish lifestyle interventions through peer support, behavior modification and stress management. Research led by the National Institutes of Health has shown that structured lifestyle interventions – losing 5 to 7 percent of body weight through healthy eating and engaging in 150 minutes of physical activity each week – can cut the risk of type 2 diabetes in half.

Many people come to these programs with a lot of "failure mentality" because they've been focused on deprivation, diets and discipline – an approach that leads to short-term change and repeated failure, according to Christensen.

"You can't have long-term behavior change until you have long-term thinking changes," she said. "We encourage people to see there are many daily victories that don't involve the scale. If you have a positive mindset about crafting a healthy lifestyle and stay focused on your healthy habits rather than the scale, the weight will follow, the activity will follow and healthy choices will follow."

The program reaches far more than the actual participants. “Ophelia is the perfect example of the power and impact of one,” Christensen said. “She was very successful in integrating the program into her life, then the lives of her family. I am thrilled that she is now a trained lifestyle coach because she is setting a course to change her entire community one life at a time.”

The program prompted Mace to transform her and her family’s relationship with food and activity. Her 67-year-old dad, who skipped meals fearing food would cause a rise in his blood sugar, lowered his blood sugar from an average of 200 to 120 by adjusting his diet.

“Now he’s more comfortable eating and enjoying food like he should,” she said.

She learned details about food selections she never knew before, including information about carbohydrates, proteins, and good and bad fats. Processed foods, once a staple in her house, are gone.

The program taught her how to prep meals ahead of time. Her son and youngest daughter spend Sunday afternoons cutting and bagging vegetables and proteins so Mace can prepare dinner quickly on busy weekdays for her dad and children, ages 18, 16, 9 and 4.

Part of the program’s strength is helping people overcome their personal challenges to healthy living, like the soda cravings Mace battled. She learned how to start an herb garden and now grows mint that she adds to her family’s water along with seasonal fruit.

When she still struggled to eliminate soda, Christensen recommended Mace keep a journal to track her emotions and food consumption. “We started to see a pattern: A lot of my cravings stemmed from my emotions,” Mace said. “It was a big eye-opener for me.”

Tracking daily food intake is a useful part of the program, Christensen said, because it helps people observe themselves in a nonjudgmental way and acknowledge their barriers to healthy eating.

At Christensen’s suggestion, Mace learned to tune into her emotions and try other activities, like increasing her walks, to counteract cravings. The advice combined with class support carried her through challenging times.

“Sharing my soda struggles with the group gave me more power to refrain from it because it wasn’t a secret anymore. I had to retrain my brain to be more open rather than keeping it inside,” she said.

The relationships between classmates help them commit to the year-long class, a necessary investment to make real lasting change. And that is the ultimate goal for the Department’s Diabetes Prevention and Control Program – enabling people to develop and maintain healthy habits by expanding their opportunities to take diabetes-prevention classes while also investing in environmental and systems changes so it’s easier for all New Mexicans to walk and bike safely and access healthy, affordable food in their communities.

“There needs to be family, neighborhood, community and organizational support for people to truly adopt lifestyle changes,” Gabriele said. “We want to keep people from being at risk for developing diabetes.”

Resources

The Department of Health offers the National Diabetes Prevention Program and Native Lifestyle Program to prevent or delay the onset of diabetes.

The Department also offers six-week workshops that help people manage such chronic conditions as pain, diabetes, HIV and cancer, as well as falls prevention programs, including tai chi for arthritis.

For more information, visit:

<https://www.pathstohealthnm.org/>