

Overcoming obesity

Renowned UB research program helps local families get healthier

By Laurie Kaiser

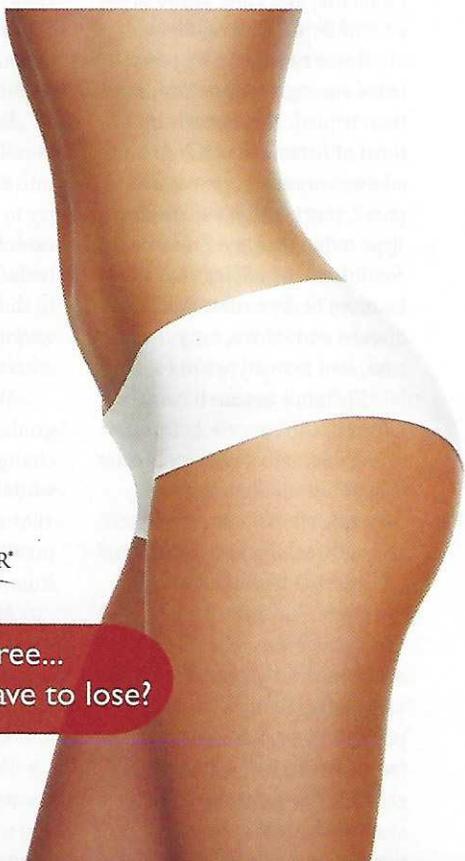
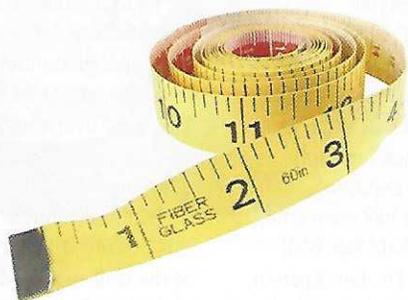
David Wolf and his wife, Kristin, wanted to help their youngest son, Matthew, slim down — but were having problems succeeding on their own. “We were not making a dent in healthy eating, and felt we weren’t doing him justice,” said David Wolf, a Grand Island resident, adding that he and his wife also have struggled with their weight.

As a busy two-income family, they had fallen into the subs-and-pizza takeout habit, and loved their Buffalo wings. Although their older sons don’t have weight problems, 9-year-old Matthew was one of the heaviest kids in his third-grade class. He was disappointed when he wasn’t allowed to play football because he exceeded the weight requirement for his age.

“We knew if we kept on with our bad eating habits, we’d have health problems in the future,” said 49-year-old Wolf, whose own weight had climbed to 270 pounds. “I wasn’t feeling good. And when I got heavier, I didn’t feel like exercising. It hurt.”

Last spring, Wolf discovered the obesity study, “Eat Well,” at the University at Buffalo, and he applied to participate. He and Matthew were chosen as one of 19 parent-child pairs in the six-month long study that began in mid-May. The children range from 8 to 12 years old.

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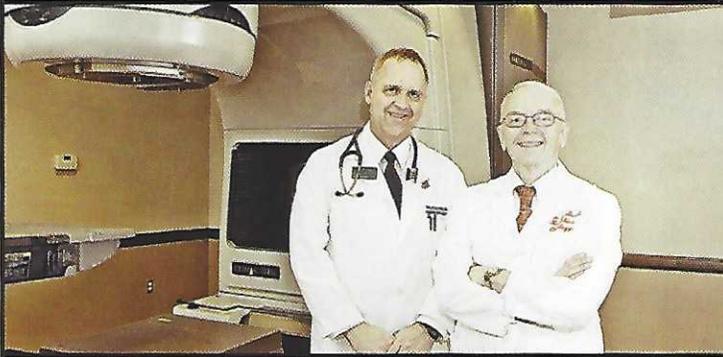
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Since 1980, obesity prevalence among children has more than tripled. Now, nearly one-third of American children and adolescents are overweight or obese.

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It's a study that encourages families to make permanent changes to their habits and lifestyles.

In the first six weeks, Wolf lost 20 pounds and Matthew dropped 18. This is above the average weight loss of about two pounds per week for adults and one pound for children.

"The study has been going fantastically," said Eat Well study director Dr. Len Epstein, State University of New York distinguished professor in the Department of Pediatrics and Social and Preventative Medicine, and chief of the division of Behavioral Medicine.

Since 1980, obesity prevalence among children has more than tripled. Now, nearly one-third of American children and adolescents are overweight or obese, putting them at risk for Type 2 diabetes and other health conditions. As adults, they may be more likely to develop heart disease and stroke, fatty liver disease, and many types of cancer.

Epstein's research, which began in the 1970s – before obesity was labeled an epidemic or had become fodder for daytime talk shows – is considered groundbreaking in the field, and is respected worldwide.

Genes haven't changed over the last few decades, Epstein said. Our lifestyles and environment have, though. Epstein points to a proliferation of fast-food restaurants, a greater variety of junk food in the grocery store aisles and sedentary activities that cause both adults and kids to pack on the pounds.

One thing that makes this study different from others is its

focus on the child and the parent together.

"We demonstrated in the 1970s that children did better in weight control if their parents participated simultaneously in treatment. Most overweight kids have overweight parents," Epstein said. "There is a lot of modeling of habits."

Another unique aspect of this obesity study is its inclusion of the well-regarded "Traffic Light Diet," which Epstein developed. Foods are divided into three categories: red (high-calorie), yellow (moderate-calorie) and green (low-calorie). Naturally, participants are encouraged to take in more green and yellow than red foods.

Eat Well also encourages families to build physical activity into their daily lives rather than try to follow a structured aerobic exercise program. This might include walking to school, biking to the store and taking family walks, plus traditional sports like soccer, Epstein said.

"When you go into the program, they tell you it's a lifestyle change," said Jodi Cook, 42, who is participating with her 11-year-old son, Marc. "You're pretty much supposed to follow it for the rest of your life."

Already, Marc has dropped 14 pounds and hopes to lose eight more, while his mom has lost more than 20 pounds and aims to lose 130 pounds eventually.

For the first 12 weeks, families meet weekly with a counselor and are divided into small groups to go over goals, plans and challenges with a caseworker. They also meet as a larger group with Epstein, who discusses topics

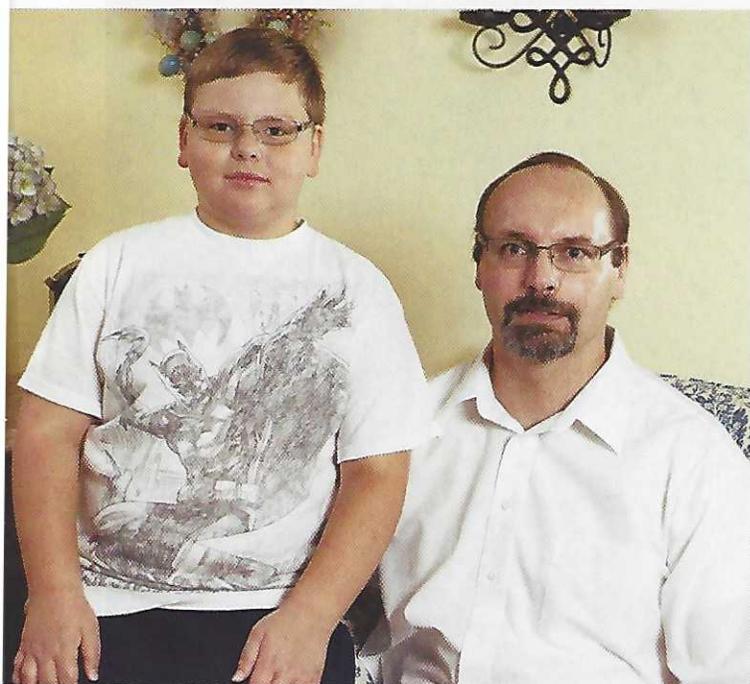


Photo by Michael Majewski

In the first six weeks participating in UB's "Eat Well" study, David Wolf lost 20 pounds and son Matthew, 9, lost 18 pounds.

likes taste preferences and getting children to try new foods. As the program continues, the meetings expand to every other week and then monthly until the study's conclusion in November.

"It gives you motivation to see the other families every week," Wolf said. "You don't want to look bad. You want to lose weight."

The children stay pretty motivated, too, said caseworker Colleen Kilanowski. Along with talking to them about good choices and overcoming temptations, Kilanowski leads the kids in interactive teaching games, some of which have physical activity built into them.

Recently, David and Matthew Wolf have been riding their bikes together and exercising in the park. Matthew said he has more energy to play with his friends.

Families also are provided with a cookbook for simple, kid-friendly dishes like meatloaf made with ground turkey and tilapia with salsa. Wolf said he was skeptical at first, but has come to like the new foods.

Matthew attributes his success to a desire to follow the rules and a better understanding of calories.

He's gotten to the point

where he will bypass a cookie or other treat offered because, "I don't want to eat 300 calories for a snack."

Likewise, Jodi Cook noted that Marc is making much better food choices, and they are both eating much less.

"He's taken to noticing how much he eats and how many calories and grams of fat are in things," Cook said. "He's good about keeping to the green or yellow foods."

Dr. Epstein said sometimes it's easier for the kids to adapt.

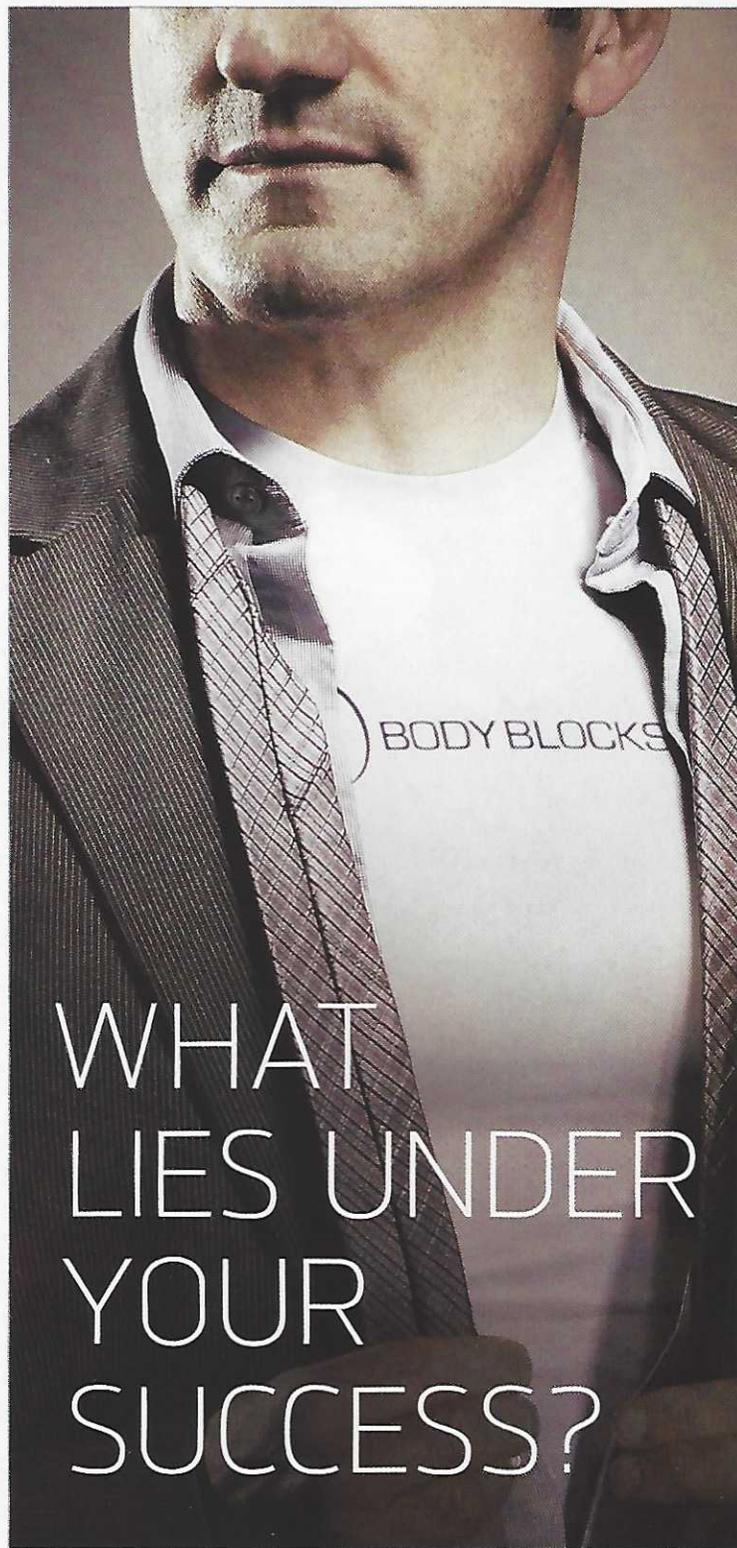
"The kids haven't had the eating styles for as long," Epstein said. "They generally come in with pretty good attitudes."

Case in point: Jodi Cook said Marc has come to own the new eating program.

"He's not asking me to write in his food log for him. He's doing it himself and reminding me to write in mine," Cook said. "He's a role model for me. He's done so much to change the way he eats."

Editor's note: UB plans to host another obesity study in 2013, with recruitment beginning this October. Families interested in being considered for the study should call 829-3400.

Laurie Kaiser is a freelance writer from Amherst.



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