

Opportunity to overcome activity barriers emerged for Somali families

December 2015 – Bloomington – Somali immigrants report that big changes in diet and physical activity are a problem for them in the U.S. Lack of routine exercise and a huge increase in fat and calories occur in their diet, resulting in many developing diabetes, some within five years after arriving in the U.S. and others as quickly as six months. Somali families in the Bloomington community want to be more active, but their new living situation makes it a challenge for them. Public Health staff arranged a solution by connecting these families to community resources that make it easier to be physically active.



Somali women now have a space where they can meet to exercise on a regular basis.

Adjusting to climate and culture presented challenges

Somali families want more opportunities for physical activity, but face barriers.

“Somali people are not used to cold temperatures, so Minnesota weather is a big barrier,” said Elham Ashkar, Bloomington’s SHIP (Statewide Health Improvement Program) coordinator. “There are cultural barriers for women as well,” Elham said. “In Somali culture, males and females are not allowed to participate together in physical activity. When there is space available, it is not at times that women can be away from their children.”

The right time and place helps

Public Health nurses who work with many of the families knew that women from one of the apartment buildings were meeting on their own to exercise – in their apartments. “We knew the apartment building had a large enough space for these women to use instead of their apartments, so we asked the apartment management company if the space could be reserved for these women to use on a regular basis,” said Elham. “They were very willing to help out. We had the right time and the right place to move forward.”

“We are off to a good start because these women are excited about this,” said Elham. “They even offered to do all the advertising and promotion in their building. Zumba classes we started out with have been very successful.” Through SHIP, Public Health plans to offer more opportunities based on recommendations from a Somali community assessment completed with the Alliance Wellness Center. The opportunities will include physical activity and learning about healthy eating.

“The goal of this project,” Elham said, “is to reduce obesity and diabetes in this cultural group. Ultimately it is good for our whole community because when everyone in our community is healthy, our community thrives.”

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