This issue brief presents results from the 2008 Aging Texas Well Indicator Survey (ATW survey)* on the topics of nutrition, physical activity and obesity. In Texas, many individuals age 60 and older have nutrition and physical activity needs that affect weight and health. This issue brief discusses topics within the context of state and national data. Current federal and state initiatives available to address these needs are introduced.

Findings on Nutrition

Most fruits and vegetables are naturally low in calories and provide essential nutrients and dietary fiber. Fruits and vegetables are important to our health as we age. Individuals who eat generous amounts of fruits and vegetables as part of a healthy diet tend to have reduced risk of chronic diseases.

Figure 1 below shows 8 percent of ATW survey respondents eat the five or more fruit and vegetable servings per day as recommended by the USDA, 2008.

*Ninety-two percent of older Texans do not eat the USDA recommended five or more fruits and vegetables per day.

* In 2004 and 2008, Texas conducted the Aging Texas Well Indicators Survey. This survey seeks to objectively measure the self-reported status of Texans over age 60 in 16 major life areas. The 2008 survey, conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of North Texas, included more than 1,000 Texans age 60 and older. Only statistically significant findings are reported in these issue briefs. The full 2008 survey report is available online at www.dads.state.tx.us/news_info/publications/studies/ATWindicators2009.pdf.
Almost 70 percent of ATW survey respondents ate fruits and vegetables two times a day or less. This finding highlights the need among older Texans for better nutrition habits.

Women (9 percent) are more likely than men (4 percent) to report eating the recommended five or more fruit and vegetable servings daily (ATW survey). Research finds that older men have less knowledge of nutrition information and consume considerably fewer fruits and vegetables than do older women.1

Findings on Physical Activity

Along with good nutrition, frequent physical activity supports a healthy life and aging. Figure 2 shows 45 percent of ATW survey respondents exercise every day or three to five times per week.

Figure 2: Frequency of participation in physical activity

According to the Aging Texas Well survey, 45 percent of older Texans report they exercise at least three to five times per week or more. Forty-three percent did not exercise in the previous month.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents participated in physical activity or exercise during the past month – running, calisthenics, gardening or walking – in which the heart rate was elevated for 30 minutes or longer. Similar to the ATW survey, the Texas Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) study (2010) asked older Texans about leisure physical activity. The Texas BRFSS found 67 percent of respondents over age 65 participated in activities to elevate their heart rate for a 30-minute period over the past month.9

In the ATW survey results, respondents 75 and older are more likely to engage in daily physical exercise than are those between 60 and 74. However, it was the 60-74 age group, rather than the 75 and older group, that was most likely to perform exercise that raised the heart rate for the desired 30 minutes or longer.
Physical activity levels vary by gender, marital status and income. Of the ATW survey respondents, men (68 percent) were far more likely than women (53 percent) to participate in physical activity that raised their heart rate in the previous month. Also, married individuals were more likely than people not married to report participation in physical activity the previous month. In addition, Hispanics (16.5 percent) reported they were far less likely than members of other ethnic groups to engage in physical activity that raised heart rate over the past month, and Anglos (61.5 percent) were much more likely to do so. Income was found to be related to physical activity. In general, the ATW survey shows that higher income correlates with greater participation in physical activity. Individuals with higher household income also reported better overall health.

Findings on Obesity

Obesity is defined as having an excessive amount of body fat. Obesity results from an imbalance between the number of calories consumed and the amount of physical energy exerted. Body mass index, (BMI: www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/adult_bmi/index.html) an indicator based on weight-to-height ratio, is used to screen and monitor weight and help determine precursors to health problems for all age groups. However, BMI is an estimation, not an exact measure. For example, BMI may reflect an older individual's inaccurate reporting of height or weight from previous years when they were taller or leaner, and therefore may underestimate body fat.8

Figure 3 shows that 34 percent of older Texans (ATW survey) reported normal weight. However, 64 percent of the sample group were either overweight (35 percent) or obese (29 percent). The statewide BRFSS found similar results.9

Sixty-four percent of Texans over age 60 report they are either overweight or obese.

Figure 3: Obesity in older Texans by BMI
Issue Analysis

In 2008, 3.4 million people in Texas, approximately 14 percent of the statewide population, were 60 years old or older. By 2040, a projected 10 million Texans (approximately 22 percent of the Texas population) will be 60 or older.9

For older adults, the benefits of healthy eating include mental acuteness, resistance to illness and disease, higher energy levels, faster recuperation from illness, and better management of chronic health problems. In addition, eating well can be the key to a positive outlook and good emotional health.6

Hunger plays an important role in nutrition. According to the National Council on Aging, six million seniors face the threat of hunger each day. More than six million older individuals are “food insecure.” Food security is defined by the Economic Research Service of the USDA as access to food sufficient for a healthy life, including nutritionally adequate and safe foods and access to food without resorting to emergency food supplies.10 The problem of food insecurity is growing in Texas. A study by Ziliak and Gundersen found Texas had the fourth-highest rate of senior hunger, an outcome of food insecurity, in the nation – 8.15 percent of people over age 60 were at risk of hunger.11

The environment also plays a significant role in nutrition, physical activity and obesity. The environment influences access to healthy foods and safe places to walk. Food intake, frequency and level of physical activity, and behavior are influenced by the environment. Research shows residents ages 50-70 who live in dangerous neighborhoods are twice as likely to be obese as those living in the safest, least hazardous neighborhoods.5 Poor and minority neighborhoods are often termed “food deserts,” due to residents' limited access to healthy foods and easier access to numerous fast-food options. In “food deserts” fresh and healthy food options distributed through grocery stores and farmers markets are much less prevalent.11

Studies show that obesity is related to physical activity in older adults. Obese adults over age 50 are more likely than older non-obese adults to have difficulty or be unable to participate in exercise and activities of daily living such as walking, shopping and attending social events.2

Obesity is a risk factor for many chronic conditions. Obesity increases the risk of coronary artery disease, Type 2 diabetes, various cancers, asthma and other respiratory problems, osteoarthritis, high blood pressure and stroke, depression and eventual disability.3 Obesity not only affects the health of older adults, it also affects their day-to-day lives. Older people who are obese report more activity limitations and feelings of sadness and hopelessness than those who are not obese.5
Along with the growing numbers of adults age 60 and over in this country, the number and proportion of obese older people are rising. The highest rates of obesity in adults are found among baby boomers (individuals born between 1946 and 1964). The first baby boomers became 65 years old in 2011. If trends persist, some national projections suggest more than half of the population age 65 and older will be obese by 2030.7

Among women age 60 and over, 61 percent of non-Hispanic black women were obese, compared with 32 percent of non-Hispanic white women and 37 percent of Mexican-American women. Among men, the prevalence of obesity did not differ by race or ethnic group.8

**Current Initiatives**

Many federal and statewide programs are designed to address nutrition, physical activity, and over-weight and obesity issues for older individuals.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) sponsors obesity programs that target older Americans. The Administration on Aging in HHS awards funds for congregate nutrition services, home-delivered nutrition services and nutrition services incentive grants to state agencies on aging. These programs aim to reduce hunger and healthy food supply shortages and improve health conditions resulting from poor nutrition or sedentary behavior. For more information, go to www.aoa.gov/AoA_programs/HCLTC/Nutrition_Services/index.aspx

Another federal program, Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), awards grants to states, U.S. territories, and federally recognized Indian tribal governments. SFMNP provides low-income seniors with coupons that can be exchanged for fresh, unprepared locally grown fruits, vegetables, and herbs from farmers markets, roadside stands and community-supported agriculture programs. For more information go to www.fns.usda.gov/wic/seniorfmnp/sfmnpmenu.htm

Another national initiative addresses the 30 percent obesity rate in the Medicare (over age 65) population. In November 2011, a new Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services rule added new services for recipients Medicare that include screening for obesity in adults using BMI measurement, a dietary (nutritional) assessment, and intensive behavioral counseling and behavioral therapy to promote sustained weight loss through high-intensity programs and interventions on diet and exercise.4

The **Eat Better & Move More (EBMM)** program, an emerging evidence-based practice, was developed specifically for local Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program sites and the Administration on Aging’s national You Can! campaign. This
campaign, part of the Steps to a Healthier U.S. initiative, encourages all Americans, including older adults, to live longer, healthier lives by being physically active, eating nutritious meals, obtaining preventive screenings, and making healthy choices including smoking cessation. Nutrition and physical activity are cornerstones of successful aging and EBMM incorporates both of these elements.

EBMM’s effectiveness has been documented in a variety of community sites nationwide serving diverse older populations, including members of racial and ethnic minority groups. For more information go to http://nutritionandaging.fiu.edu/You_Can/index.asp.

Go4Life, a recently launched exercise and physical activity campaign from the National Institute on Aging at the National Institute of Health (NIH), is designed to integrate exercise and physical activity into daily life. Go4Life offers exercises, motivational tips and free resources. The Go4Life campaign includes an evidence-based exercise guide in both English and Spanish, an exercise video, an interactive website and a national outreach campaign. For more information go to http://go4life.niapublications.org.

The Texas Department of Aging and Disability (DADS) and the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) promote model physical activity, proper nutrition and obesity prevention programs. A few of these are described below.

Texercise is a statewide health promotion program developed by DADS to educate and involve older Texans and their families in physical activities and proper nutrition. The Texercise program promotes individual activity, community events, and policies that support fitness in the 16 ATW life areas. Through the Texercise program, participants are provided with an array of educational, motivational and recognition resources that encourage participation in healthy habits. These resources include the Texercise handbook, exercise DVD, resistance bands, and T-shirts – all provided at no cost to participants. The Texercise program developed eight fact sheets on nutrition topics including portion guide, healthy cooking, and sodium reduction (available in English and Spanish). For more information, go to www.Texercise.com.

Programs sponsored by DSHS and coordinated through the Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention Section address nutrition policy and environmental change initiatives.

- A DSHS video series, Growing Community, is a communications initiative and tool created to educate and inspire communities to take action against obesity in Texas. The series includes six obesity prevention topic areas recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For information about the Growing Community video series, go to http://growingcommunity.facs.texas.gov.
Community video series with both English and Spanish captions, please go to www.dshs.state.tx.us/obesity/GrowingCommunity/default.shtm.

• Through DSHS funding, Texas Tech University Health Science Center supports a nutrition and physical activity initiative in collaboration with the Lubbock's Parks and Recreations Department. This initiative includes policy and environmental changes for menu labeling and lower prices at park concession stands to increase access and affordability for healthy food options. In addition, Texas Tech University posts signs in local parks with nutrition information and mile markers to increase physical activity.

• DSHS also provides funding to Tarrant County for initiatives to improve access to fresh foods. Tarrant County aims to increase access to affordable fruits and vegetables in the workplace and to reduce barriers for low-income families shopping at farmers markets. The initiative promotes healthy eating, provides recipes, and gives demonstrations on cooking with fruits and vegetables. In addition, Tarrant County is working with a local food bank to create five community gardens and promote farmers markets in underserved communities. To this end, Tarrant County will encourage the use of electronic benefits transfer for fruit and vegetable purchases at farmers markets.

Good nutrition and frequent physical activity are important to the quality of life after age 60. The 2008 ATW survey results and other research findings point to the need to improve nutrition and physical activity for older Texans. This brief highlights a few of the many federal, state and local programs available to address these needs. Learn more about these initiatives and consider passing them on to help people improve their nutrition and physical activity as they age well.
References


