



Recommendations on Nutrition and Physical Activity American Cancer Society

California Working Families Policy Summit January 18, 2002

The American Cancer Society has set ambitious goals to significantly reduce the rates of cancer incidence and mortality, along with goals to dramatically improve the quality of life for all people with cancer. Meeting these goals requires a new partnership for the nation and California and will require a commitment from both the public and private sectors. Scientific evidence continues to mount and suggests that one-third of cancer deaths that occur in California are due to dietary choices and physical inactivity. For the great majority of Californians who do not smoke cigarettes, dietary choices and physical activity are the most important modifiable determinants of cancer risk.

Although genetic inheritance influences the risk of cancer, most of the variation in cancer risk across populations and among individuals is due to factors that are not inherited. Behavioral factors such as tobacco use, certain dietary patterns, and being inactive can substantially affect one's risk of developing cancer. Poverty imposes additional barriers that can limit food choices and interfere with good nutrition. We must remove the substantial barriers that make it difficult to follow dietary and activity recommendations.

The California Division of the American Cancer Society is enthusiastic about the opportunity that this Summit offers to focus on nutrition and physical activity priorities that can improve the quality of life for working families. What is presented below is for discussion purposes and is intended to stimulate the emergence of a consensus agenda.

I. Need for Community Action

Because healthy individual behaviors are influenced by the social, economic, cultural and environmental factors of a community, the American Cancer Society recommends a comprehensive plan for community action. Facilitating improved diet and increased physical activity patterns will require multiple strategies, ranging from education and communication; community planning, transportation, physical education and foods offered in schools; to workplace health promotions. Particular efforts will be needed to ensure that all population groups have access to healthful food choices and opportunities for physical activity.

Recommendations:

- A. Establish a comprehensive statewide program to promote healthy eating and physical activity and develop a blueprint for a comprehensive coordinated food, nutrition and physical activity policy in California. This comprehensive program should support public/private partnerships through which stakeholders in the public, non-profit and business sectors can work together on large-scale initiatives.
- B. Support comprehensive promotional campaigns to raise public awareness of the benefits of improving diet and physical activity in order to reduce mortality from chronic diseases including cancer. These promotional campaigns could include electronic, print, transit and outdoor media. They should be designed to capture consumer attention, create more positive social norms about healthy eating and active living, generate consumer demand for healthier options in the marketplace, and support organizational policies that make choosing healthy food and physical activity easier.
- C. Allocate State funds in order to meet the requirements to achieve the maximum federal dollars from all USDA sources. Because young people tend to carry healthy or unhealthy habits into adulthood, this trend, if not reversed, could easily lead to more cases of cancer in the future. Children and adolescents are major recipients of USDA programs. As the number of obese children is on the rise, the diets and activity habits of young Californians fall well below the guidelines of the USDA and American Cancer Society.
- D. Encourage California foundations to fund advocacy, startup and demonstration projects in nutrition and physical activity.
- E. Encourage the California Commission on Children and Families and its local counterparts to make nutrition and physical activity initiatives for working families a priority in their planning and program funding.
- F. Establish local assistance grants to help local government and non-profit agencies conduct organizational and community driven initiatives as part of statewide campaigns. Grants could be awarded to a variety of local projects, including the development of Food and Physical Activity Councils to help organizations work together to secure permanent community change.

II. Improving Food Choices in California

The ability to assure a stable nutritional diet is at an unacceptable level with California recently ranking as the 11th worst for hunger in the nation. While California is the largest grower of produce in the nation, consumption of fruit and vegetables by Californians is lower than in most other states. Incentives to growers and distributors would improve availability of fruit and vegetables to those most in need. While most Americans would like to adopt a healthful lifestyle, many confront substantial barriers that make it difficult to follow diet and activity guidelines. Current trends toward increasing consumption of high-calorie convenience foods and declining levels of physical activity are contributing to an alarming epidemic of obesity among Americans of all ages across all population segments. Longer work days and more households with multiple wage earners reduce the amount of time available for preparation of meals, with a resulting shift toward increased

consumption of food outside the home, processed foods, fast foods, and snack foods.

Recommendations:

- A. Develop a state and local infrastructure to improve the ability of communities to promote good nutrition and physical activity. Establish a collaboration of broad based, multi-sector stakeholders under a parent organization.
- B. Increase use of federal funds for outreach to increase participant use of federal food programs. The American Cancer Society supports the work of these nutrition assistance and nutrition education programs including the Food Stamp Program (that includes two optional education initiatives, the WIC and the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs). Most of these programs are targeted to socio-economically disadvantaged groups that also have a disproportionate cancer burden as well as a great need for nutrition assistance. California's participation rates in these programs are among the lowest in the country, and rates of food instability are among the highest.
- C. Encourage a retail partnership with produce growers and 100% fresh vegetable and fruit juice purveyors. An example would be direct marketing demonstration projects to increase access to fruits and vegetables in low-income communities.

III. Increasing Physical Activity

Persuading Californians to adopt healthy behaviors will require that we engage them in a variety of ways. These efforts should incorporate non-traditional strategies that have the potential to impact large numbers of people. The health benefits of physical activity to reduce cancer and other chronic diseases are thought to accumulate over a lifetime and are facilitated by the development of health activity patterns in childhood. However, increasing the level of physical activity at any age can provide important health benefits. The guideline to include moderate to vigorous activities in one's lifestyle is supported by a recent extensive review by the World Health Organization. Three out of four Californians do not follow the physical activity guidelines of being active for 30 minutes for most days of the week. Reasons given most frequently include lack of opportunity, lack of safe access and few incentives.

Recommendations:

- A. Increase the availability of safe and convenient places to be physically active, such as bicycle paths, pedestrian open spaces, and no or low cost physical activity locations, including recreation areas and parks.
- B. Improve access of working families to physical activity opportunities outside of usual work hours and seven days a week.
- C. Encourage public health initiatives in the work place for employers to offer work site health promotion programs, e.g. employer provision of bicycle storage, shower/changing rooms, or physical activity flex-time.

IV. Build Capacity and Oversight

Few people are aware of the huge physical, emotional and medical costs associated with poor nutrition, sedentary lifestyles and the epidemic of obesity. Building awareness of the risk reduction is a priority of the American Cancer Society.

Recommendations:

- A. Establish a coalition of organizations, using the model of tobacco control, to promote nutrition and physical activity.
- B. Support implementation of the current Governor's Council on Nutrition and Physical Activity.

V. Research and Professional Development

Despite universal agreement on the magnitude of the epidemic of overweight and obesity, relatively few resources are being invested in research. Prevention research can help uncover the reasons why individuals develop unhealthy habits and what prompts them to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Recommendations:

- A. Continue to support research at University of California and other institutions to identify further measurable biological factors and sociological causes of poor nutrition/physical inactivity as well as obesity. Devise effective methods of prevention, behavior change and treatment.
- B. Continue to support ongoing statewide and local population surveys, studies to guide the planning of campaign initiatives, applied research in different operational settings, and large-scale evaluations. Surveillance efforts should be strengthened and benchmarks established by which progress can be measured and programs continually evaluated and improved.
- C. Recognize that health care professionals are especially persuasive when talking to patients about lifestyle changes, they can provide leadership in making changes in their communities. This can be accomplished by enhancing professional development for health professionals to improve science-based nutrition and physical activity information flow.

Conclusion

To reverse the current trends in diet and activity habits and the resultant increases in overweight and obesity among many segments of the population, increased attention and dedicated resources are needed. Positive action on the part of communities, public and private organizations, and individuals to raise the awareness of this issue and to influence change will be needed.