



Making the  
**Healthy  
Choice**  
the **Easy  
Choice**

A Guide for Community  
Discussions in the  
Mid-Ohio Valley



# Welcome to the Discussion!



**C**hange the Future WV is working with coalitions in six counties (Calhoun, Pleasants, Ritchie, Roane, Wirt and Wood) to improve access to physical activity and healthy nutrition. Ideas and involvement from community members are vital to the success of the project and to the health of our region. The purpose of these community discussions is to:

- Think and talk together about ways we can make the healthy choice the easy choice when it comes to food and physical activity.
- Collect and consider ideas for improving policies, systems and environments that will lead to better physical fitness and nutrition the mid-Ohio Valley.
- Help people get involved in this effort by linking them to county coalitions and other opportunities to work on the issue.



**Change the Future WV** is a collaborative project of the Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department and West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), State Department of Education and WVU Health Research Center. The project is funded by a grant from "Communities Putting Prevention to Work," a federal initiative funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For more information, visit the project website at [www.changethefuturewv.org](http://www.changethefuturewv.org).

**The Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department** serves the City of Parkersburg, Calhoun, Pleasants, Ritchie, Roane, Wirt and Wood Counties with additional WIC offices

in Jackson, Gilmer and Mason Counties. To learn more, visit the agency's website at [www.movhd.com](http://www.movhd.com). For more information on Change the Future WV and other health and wellness initiatives, contact:

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**The Healthy Lifestyles Program (HLP)** administers the funding for Change the Future WV. HLP is dedicated to improving the health of West Virginians by promoting the importance of physical activity and good nutrition. HLP is located in the DHHR Bureau for Public Health, Division of Health Promotion & Chronic Disease. For more information, contact:

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**The West Virginia Center for Civic Life** assisted with designing the forums, developing the discussion guide and training moderators. The Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to engage citizens in community discussions of important public issues that affect our state and nation. For more information, visit the Center's website at [www.wvciviclif.org](http://www.wvciviclif.org), or contact:

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# How Can We Make the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice?

## The Challenge

Healthy weight and physical fitness have been a growing national concern for more than 50 years. President Eisenhower launched the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports in 1956 to encourage individuals and communities to adopt active lifestyles. The federal government has sponsored numerous fitness initiatives since then. The most recent is *Let’s Move*, a campaign to reduce childhood obesity spearheaded by First Lady Michelle Obama.

States and communities have also been actively involved in the issue. A major milestone in the Mountain State was the passage of the West Virginia Healthy Lifestyles Act in 2005. The law established mandates for schools regarding: (1) the sale of healthy beverages and soft drinks, (2) physical education time, (3) fitness testing, (4) the collection of body mass index measurements, and (5) health education instruction and assessment.

In 2008, the West Virginia State Board of Education adopted Standards for School Nutrition modeled after Institute of Medicine guidelines. The new standards aim to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables and to decrease consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and fatty or highly processed foods.

Together, West Virginia’s Healthy Lifestyles Act and Standards for School Nutrition make our state a national leader in policies to improve health and reduce obesity among children.

The new policies are yielding promising results. For example, West Virginia University researchers have found notable improvements in nutrition, with students consuming soda and fast food less often and eating the recommended number of fruits and vegetables more often. In addition, more schools are offering physical activity programs for families.

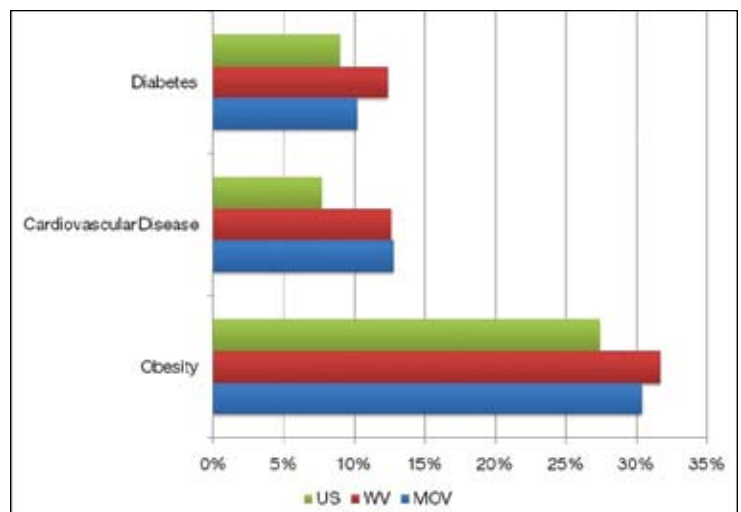
Much work remains to be done, however. Across the nation, more than one quarter of adults and 17 percent

of children are obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. West Virginia fares poorly on measures of obesity and related health problems, ranking *sixth highest in the nation for obesity, second highest for diabetes, and highest for cardiovascular disease and hypertension.*

West Virginians are also less likely than other Americans to have the nutrition and physical activity that supports healthy weights. We rank *second highest in the nation for physical inactivity and third highest for people who eat fewer than five fruits or vegetables daily.*

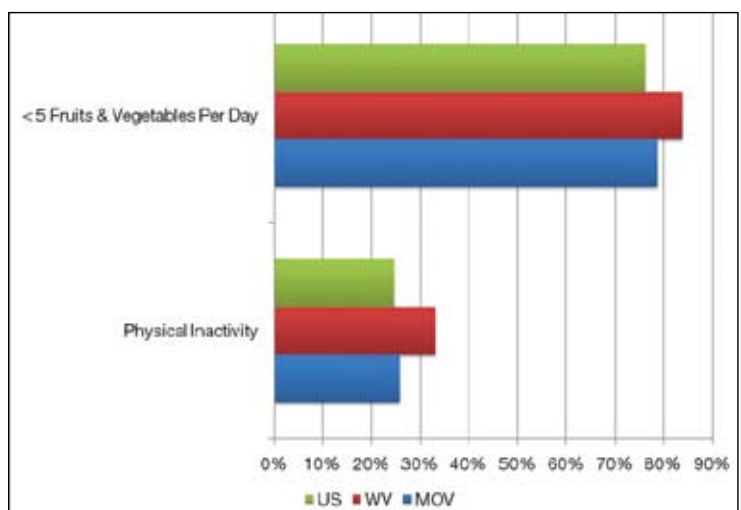
The Mid-Ohio Valley ranks a little better than the state average on most indicators, but worse than national averages, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

**Figure 1: Prevalence of Obesity and Related Health Problems**



Source: West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, Health Statistics Center

**Figure 2: Prevalence of Risk Factors for Obesity**



Source: West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, Health Statistics Center

## Taking a Broader View of the Problem

For many years, the main approach to healthy weight has been education: People should watch what they eat and not consume more calories than they use in their daily activities. The responsibility for healthy weight was placed squarely with individuals and families to make good choices and avoid bad ones.

Despite repeated efforts to change individual behavior, obesity rates for adults have doubled and rates for children have tripled in the U.S. since 1980. This has led health providers and researchers to step back and take a broader view of the issue. A new approach to healthy weight is emerging that is guided by new questions:

- 1 How can we make the healthy choice the easy choice?
- 2 How can we create communities rich with opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity?
- 3 What improvements can we make to policies, systems and environments that will encourage healthy choices?

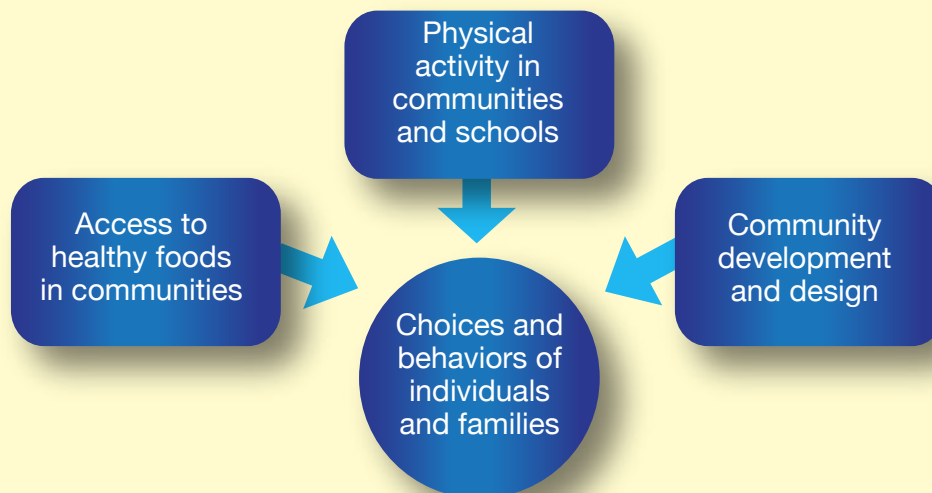


## What Can Communities Do?

Taking this big-picture approach, Change the Future WV is working with county-based coalitions on three key strategies to make it easier to choose healthy options: access to healthy foods in communities, physical activity in communities and schools, and community development and design. (See Figure 3.)

During this discussion, we'll examine each of these strategies. We'll talk about what we're already doing in each area, what further actions could be pursued, and what community members and groups can do to support efforts to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

**Figure 3: Change the Future WV's Key Strategies for Healthier Lifestyles in the Mid-Ohio Valley**



# 1

## Access to Healthy Foods in Communities

People who have better access to supermarkets consume more fresh produce and other healthy foods, according to research by the Food Trust, a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit group. The greater the access, the lower the rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and premature death.

Rural and low-income communities, which are plentiful in West Virginia, typically have less access to healthy foods and higher rates of diet-related medical conditions.

West Virginia students are eating healthier, on average, thanks to the state's new school nutrition standards. But we need additional strategies to boost the availability of healthy foods in our communities. For example, of the 87 convenience stores in the Mid-Ohio Valley, only 10 percent sell fresh fruits and vegetables.

Barriers to healthy eating also include marketing strategies that promote unhealthy food choices, such as candy bars in check-out lines or selling children's toys near the soft drinks and chips. The marketing begins before birth, when many pregnant women are given free samples of baby formula, even though health experts agree that breast milk is the more nutritious choice.

### Possible Actions:

- More fresh fruits and vegetables sold in convenience stores.
- Promotion of healthy foods by grocers and no marketing of unhealthy foods to children.
- More farmer's markets in convenient locations, with EBT and debit machines.
- More healthy foods available at concession stands at school sporting events.
- Supportive environments for breastfeeding in workplaces and at hospitals.



What are we already doing in our county to improve access to healthy foods?

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What else should we do to make the healthy choice the easy choice when it comes to healthy food?

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What can community members and groups do to support these changes?

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Regular physical activity helps control weight, reduces the risk for many diseases, and strengthens muscles, bones, and joints, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The rise in unhealthy weight is related not only to an abundance of unhealthy foods, but also to a drop in physical activity – more screen time, less physical education and more travel by car.

Many fitness experts support restoring daily physical education in schools. Currently, the State Department of Education requires schools to provide physical education (PE) only 90 minutes per week for elementary students and 2,700 minutes (45 hours) per year for middle school students. High school students need only one full course credit of PE and be offered one elective PE course.

Schools may submit an alternate plan if they lack the facilities and resources to meet the requirements. They may also opt to provide more physical education than required.

But physical activity isn't just about fitness classes and sports programs. It can be as simple as "instant recess," 10-minute exercise breaks incorporated into school, work and community life. Communities can encourage physical activity by supporting safe environments for playing and by improving, expanding and connecting trails for walking and biking.

### Possible Actions:

- Daily physical education in middle and high schools.
- More safe and attractive places to play in communities.
- More trails for walking, hiking and biking and improved connectivity of trails.
- Community events and programs that support biking and walking.
- More media coverage of fitness opportunities and events.



What are we already doing to encourage physical activity in schools and communities?

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What else should we do to make the healthy choice the easy choice when it comes to physical activity?

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What can community members and groups do to support these changes?

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People who live in communities with parks, playgrounds and safe routes for walking and biking tend to have more physical activity than those who don't, according to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. And, as noted earlier, people who live near supermarkets eat more fresh produce.

Land use, building, transportation and economic development policies are important tools for creating healthful communities. For example, county comprehensive plans give local residents the opportunity to help shape goals for land use, community design, recreation, pedestrian and bicycle routes and other issues that impact physical activity and health.

Many communities across the country are looking at ways to make roads more welcoming and safe for everyone. "Complete street" policies ensure that transportation planners and engineers design roadways with all users in mind – including pedestrians, bicyclists and public transportation riders. In rural areas, this could mean roads with wide, paved shoulders.

The Food Trust used a community development approach when it helped launch the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, a grant and loan program to encourage supermarket development in underserved areas. The initiative has provided funding for 88 fresh-food retail outlets in 34 Pennsylvania counties, creating or preserving more than 5,000 jobs and improving access to healthy food for more than half a million people.

### Possible Actions:

- Development of model policies for land use planning that reflect what local residents want for their communities.
- Workshops for policymakers and community members on developing safe, connected routes for pedestrian and bicycle travel.
- Clear and consistent signage to identify and promote pedestrian and bike routes.
- Economic incentives for fresh produce retailers in underserved communities.



What are we already doing with community development and design to support healthy choices?

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What else should we do to make the healthy choice the easy choice when it comes to community development and design?

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What can community members and groups do to support these changes?

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# Stay informed. Get Involved.



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Learn more about making the healthy choice the easy choice...

- Communities Putting Prevention to Work - [www.cdc.gov/CommunitiesPuttingPreventiontoWork](http://www.cdc.gov/CommunitiesPuttingPreventiontoWork)
- President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports - [www.fitness.gov](http://www.fitness.gov)
- Let's Move - [www.letsmove.gov](http://www.letsmove.gov)
- National Complete Street Coalition - [www.completestreets.org](http://www.completestreets.org)
- The Food Trust - [www.thefoodtrust.org](http://www.thefoodtrust.org)