Santa Barbara County Recognizes National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month

In recognition of September as National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors will issue a proclamation on September 6 at 1:30 p.m. acknowledging the problem of childhood obesity in Santa Barbara County and the efforts of the Public Health Department and other organizations to combat obesity among local children.

Childhood obesity has reached epidemic levels in the United States. An estimated 23 million children and teenagers age two to 19 are overweight or obese, triple the rate of 30 years ago. In Santa Barbara County, about 30% of children in grades 5-9, and 34% of teens, are overweight or obese. One-third of 2-5 year olds, and 46% of 5-19 year olds, from lower income families are overweight or obese. Diabetes and other weight-related health problems have increased among children as well as adults in recent years. Further, 80% of obese children will become obese adults. For the first time in history, children may have shorter life expectancies than their parents.

“Many factors contribute to the problem of childhood obesity,” explained Dr. Takashi Wada, County Health Officer and Director of Public Health. “Diets high in starches, fat, and sugar, insufficient physical activity, not being able to afford healthier, but more expensive, foods like fresh fruits and vegetables, and the convenience of fast food, are some of the leading factors.”

According to the County’s 2011 Community Health Status Report, just over half of local children, and only 17% of area teens, eat the recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Nearly two-thirds of children eat fast food one or more times per week, and 29% of teens consume two or more glasses of soda or other sugary drinks each day. Santa Barbara County has three times as many convenience stores and fast food restaurants as supermarkets and produce vendors. Further, only 39% of local children are physically active the recommended one hour per day, and 12% are completely sedentary.

The Public Health Department is collaborating with local schools, non-profits, medical providers, and other organizations to develop a comprehensive, long-term obesity prevention plan. The plan will address environmental strategies that promote healthy weight, such as increasing access to healthy foods and increasing the walkability of communities, as well as educational and fitness programs for children and adults.

Local organizations are offering a variety of activities to prevent childhood obesity throughout the month of September. For more information contact Trina Long at (805) 346-7275 or trina.long@sbcphd.org, and visit the Public Health Department website at www.sbcphd.org.