

By Mary Jo Tarallo

Just about everybody involved in physical activity programs knows the alarming news about Americans' lack of ability to get the appropriate blend of nutrition and exercise.

Headlines bark at us daily about spiraling healthcare costs and a myriad of unwanted diseases that stem from obesity and lack of movement. The facts are astounding. They have been widely reported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Department of Health and Human Services, among other organizations and government agencies.

Poor diet and sedentary lifestyles soon will overtake smoking as the most preventable cause of death in the U.S. This "double whammy" currently accounts for 17 percent

Take Another Look At Winter — Snowshoe Programs Work At Fitness Issues

of deaths in America which rose from 300,000 per year in 1990 to 400,000 only a decade later.

Almost two-thirds of American adults (64 percent), or more than 123 million people, either are overweight or obese. Poor diet and lack of activity are beginning to affect children to a frightening degree.

"Children today have a shorter life expectancy than their parents for the first time in 100 years," says Dr. William J. Klish, professor of pediatrics, Baylor College of Medicine.

The number of overweight or obese children and adolescents has tripled in the past 30 years. Type 2 diabetes, once considered an adult disease, has increased dramatically in children and adolescents. Contributing to this epidemic is the fact that while the physical fitness and health of children has been steadily declining, the number of physical education classes in schools has been simultaneously dropping as well.

Heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and diabetes are conditions that can be directly related to overweight and obesity issues. The timing is right for enhanced activity programs that can be enjoyed regardless of the season.

It all comes down to this: Americans need to get more exercise. YMCAs are uniquely positioned to play a pivotal role to make this happen, particularly in winter.



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Winter can be a major contributor to inactivity and nutrition deviance when short days and long nights seemingly prompt humans to overindulge in food and underutilize their body parts. Outdoor activities in winter can be particularly onerous because, well — it's too darn cold and too easy to find excuses.

YMCAs in many parts of the country can offer communities winter activity programs that will help local citizens develop and maintain fit and healthy lifestyles all year around. Snow sports are particularly attractive because they offer non-competitive, socially interactive, physically beneficial activities in which all members of a family can participate, regardless of age.

Snow sports are fun and they build on the same aerobic, cardiovascular, and weight-control activities as "off-

season" counterparts. They can attract a whole new clientele to a Y as well as providing winter programming for existing Y members.

Walking, jogging, weight-training, bicycling, swimming and even yoga all are considered "cross-over" sports for a snow sports enthusiast. Anyone interested in building or maintaining endurance, strength, and flexibility, will enjoy snow sports.

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SnowSports Industries America (SIA), the national nonprofit trade association for snow sport suppliers, has created a public service campaign called Winter Feels Good to help organizations, like YMCAs, develop activity programs involving winter sports.

The cornerstone of the campaign is

the www.winterfeelsgood Web site. This information source is chock full of material addressing the health, fitness, and social benefits of snow sports participation, tips on nutrition, hydration, proper dress for winter outdoor activities, sample programs, links to a myriad of resources in the snow sports and fitness worlds, and more.

Snowshoeing is rapidly increasing in popularity. It is an easy sport to learn and adapts well to a YMCA activity program located in any community where snow falls and lingers a bit.

"We thought it would be a great way to get kids outside in the winter," said Christian Craig, director of Teen Programming and Day Camps for the YMCA in Burlington, Vt. "We are probably the largest child care provider in our part of Vermont, and our snowshoe and cross country after-school activities for kids works well, especially in schools that lose their gyms to team sports like basketball."

Snowshoes have been in use for about

6,000 years, but only recently have been thought of as recreational and fitness equipment. Snowshoes are easy to put on, take off, and store. Bindings are fully adjustable to accommodate a wide range of boot styles and sizes. They are also inexpensive to purchase.

Most snowshoe companies have very active community outreach programs through local retail merchants that make the sport almost turnkey for incorporation into YMCA programs for various age categories. They are the best source for authentic expertise and resources.

"Snowshoe manufacturers can assist Y program managers with proper assortment, sizing, and other needs to create a successful program and investment," said Kathy Murphy, general manager of Stowe, Vermont-based Tubbs Snowshoes.

Easy To Learn

"We offer YMCAs special pricing to establish snowshoe programs for fun and fitness either for Y-specific programming

or to augment programming with fee-based rental equipment for members' personal use."

What makes snowshoeing attractive, and a draw for urban and rural YMCAs alike, is that the learning curve is almost immediate. If you can walk, you can snowshoe.

Participants do not have to be in peak physical condition or learn complex techniques to enjoy and benefit from the activity. Other than learning how to put on the snowshoes and the proper clothing choices, the rest is standard physical fitness similar to other activities the Y offers. Heart rate, duration, and intensity are the same as in other fitness activities, although the level and pace of a snowshoe workout does not correlate directly with that of running or walking.

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"What is really needed for a program to succeed is someone to champion the activity," said Karen Righthand of Atlas Snowshoe Company, based in San Francisco. "We'll train those people. If you have one 'go-to' person in a Y who knows the equipment and loves the activity, we find that combination to be a key to success."

Content is equally important. Programs should include conditioning exercises, instruction on how to dress properly for outdoor activities in winter, an overview of the equipment, basic instruction about how different types of

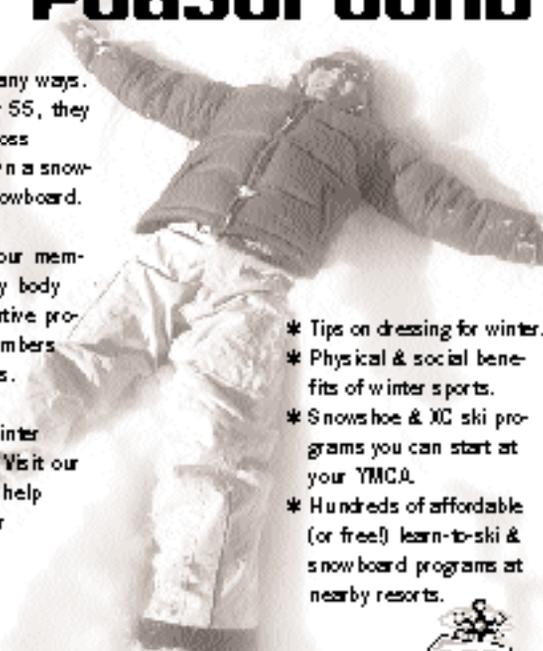
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Winter can be a time of inactivity for children and adults. Snowshoe programs can involve all members of the family and can be conducted wherever the snow falls.

snowshoes perform along with a demonstration on technique, general health and fitness benefits, and pointers on nutrition and hydration.

Several programs already exist that can be utilized in their entirety or used as a model by YMCAs. Tubbs' Winter Fit program provides opportunities for individuals of any ability level, particularly women and children, to experience a healthy, low impact winter activity. It was created with organizations like the Y in mind.

Winter Fit, accredited by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), is a comprehensive 6-12 week program that includes instructor-supervised training, fitness centers-based complimentary indoor session, and on-snow guided or self-guided workouts. The program is based upon exercise physiology principles and research findings from independent studies at major universities.

Atlas collaborates with the Winter Wildland Alliance to offer Snow School,

a dynamic program aimed at children. Snow School incorporates snowshoeing with physical education activities, environmental, and ecology studies. More than 35,000 children participated in Snow School programs last winter. It is an interesting model for Y professionals to explore for programming ideas.

Great For Women

Cathy Sasson, an adventure expert from Bend, Ore., has been hopscotching the country on behalf of Atlas Snowshoes, conducting clinics for women. Her model can be easily adapted and serves as a conduit for the entire family.

Sasson's 90-minute clinic covers how to choose snowshoes, pointing out how snowshoes for women differ from those produced

for men, the concept of layering so that participants know how to stay warm outside, the use of poles, trip planning, pros and cons of various sites, and more.

Sasson, having come from a large family, is quick to point out how an activity like snowshoeing can appeal to several generations.

"When we get together for holidays, my parents, who are not athletes, my brothers and sisters and their children, all get together for a snowshoe outing," says the former YMCA professional whose first job out of college was a position as an exercise physiologist with the Westside Branch YMCA in Los Angeles.

"Any time you can spend with friends is quality time," she says. "Snowshoeing has the ability to bring different types of people together and it is a great alternative to shopping or a coffee break among friends. Snowshoeing is the biggest-bang-for-your-buck, fat burning workout you can get."

Another approach, particularly for YMCAs without nearby fields, is to form a partnership with the local department of recreation and parks in parts of the country that get an adequate amount of natural snowfall. The agency's Web site www.nrpa.org is loaded with information about resources that can be tapped. Atlas, Tubbs, and other snowshoe companies will work with you to provide trail markers and signage for an on-snow experience.

Winter Kids, a program based in

GRANTS ARE AVAILABLE

Carol H. White Physical Education for Progress (PEP) grants now make it possible for nonprofit community-based organizations such as YMCAs to apply for grants that complement or enhance school and after-school physical education programs for children.

More than \$70 million dollars were allocated in FY '04, up from \$50 million in 2003. Lobbying efforts now are focused on at least maintaining, if not increasing, the allocation for 2005. The grant deadline is generally in the spring.

Grants allow for hiring of trainers and purchase of products. Redfeather Snowshoes in Colorado, and other snowshoe companies that are members of SnowSports Industries America, already have partnered with schools and organizations to provide products at very reasonable rates in cooperation with retail merchants in the local community. Information about PEP programs can be found on the Department of Education and PE4Life Web sites.

Maine, combines snow sports with a myriad of educational content that can be used in schools or community outreach programs. The Winter Kids curriculum is extensive and can offer a base for a program that combines indoor learning with an outdoor experience.

A nearby nordic center, particularly one of nearly 200 centers that belong to the Cross Country Ski Areas Association throughout the U.S., can work with you to provide an on-snow experience as well.

These well-maintained facilities offer manicured trails and most include snowshoeing in addition to cross country skiing. Nordic Centers, as well as snowshoe companies themselves, can be excellent partners to provide an "on-snow" experience for those who learn the elements of the sport through their local Y. Most snowshoe companies will offer discounts to YMCAs for product purchases and a host of other resources.

Appeal For Families

The YMCA of the Rockies organizes winter hikes on snowshoes out of its Estes Park location. Oddly, the site does not get that much natural snowfall even though it is located about 70 miles northwest of Denver, Colo.

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“Families and school groups alike go on our hikes,” said Gail Albers, program director.

“Snowshoeing is extremely popular for folks who just like to get up in the mountains.”

The beauty of snowshoeing is its

appeal, not just to children, but to adults as well. Entire families benefit. Muscles used in snowshoeing are similar to those used in walking or hiking hilly terrain, although hip flexors and quadriceps get more use due to the lifting motion of each step. Pole use gets the upper body moving and helps condition arms, shoulders, and back muscles.

Snowshoeing offers even greater fitness benefits as experience increases. Studies at the University of Vermont, Ball State University, and Indiana University found that snowshoeing is a low impact way to develop and maintain cardiovascular fitness.

Snowshoeing can burn from nearly 500 to nearly 1,000 calories per hour, depending on weight and activity intensity. That's twice the number of calories as walking at the same speed. Snowshoeing is an ideal form of cross training for summer hikers, cyclists, and runners. Individuals who substitute snowshoeing for running during the winter months build strength and endurance as well as maintain their cardiovascular fitness levels year round.

Many communities, except for those in the extreme southern tier of the United States, have enough snowfall for an outdoor snowshoeing experience at some point during the winter. It only takes about six inches. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Web site (www.noa.gov) is a great resource that can help determine if your location makes sense.

A niche market that could be worth investigating is winter camping and backpacking. Portland-based company, MSR/Cascade Designs, supplies snowshoes and a wide range of winter camping products such as tents, sleeping bags, inflatable mattresses, hydration devices, and stoves. Atlas also offers backcountry equipment.

Take time now, during the summer, to create a fun, easy-to-implement family YMCA program that works at alleviating America's obesity problem. Snowshoeing just might be an easy way for your Y to make a difference. 

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