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UAMS Study Shows Schools Lowered Sodium Content of Lunches by 11.2 Percent

FAYETTEVILLE – Public schools in Springdale have lowered the sodium content of school lunches by 11.2 percent, research by the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) shows.

In an article in “Preventing Chronic Disease,” published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), researchers from the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus outlined the progress of the first year of a five-year Sodium Reduction in Communities Program (SRCP) in Northwest Arkansas.

Northwest Arkansas was one of eight sites to receive an SRCP project in 2016 from the CDC. Other sites included Los Angeles County, New York City, Seattle and Philadelphia. UAMS and local stakeholders selected public school cafeterias and community meals programs (programs that offer free meals to low-income residents) as the Northwest Arkansas venues to implement sodium reduction strategies because they serve populations at elevated risk for hypertension, namely low-income and food-insecure populations.

The 30 schools that are participating in the program include three high schools, four junior high schools, 18 elementary schools and one pre-kindergarten school. The five community meals programs include three on-site programs, commonly known as soup kitchens, and two weekend food bag programs, commonly known as backpack programs.

The UAMS project team collected daily menus, information on nutritional content of meals and procurement records, and counted the number of people served in partnering schools and community meals programs.

They researched potential implementation strategies, prepared materials and developed examples of how each venue could implement the SRCP strategies. They then proposed actions to the food policy committees at each school or community food program.

Throughout the year, UAMS staff engaged school district personnel to implement procurement practices to reduce sodium content in foods and ingredients purchased by

the school district. To encourage procurement of lower-sodium foods and ingredients, a UAMS registered dietitian and a registered nutrition and dietetic technician taste-tested lower-sodium recipes with district personnel. At the same time, UAMS staff worked with school district personnel to implement food preparation practices to reduce sodium content of menu items and meals.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, sustained excessive sodium intake is associated with hypertension and cardiovascular disease, which is the leading cause of death in the U.S. The 2015–2020 “Dietary Guidelines for Americans” recommends that daily sodium intake not exceed 2,300 mg for people aged 14 years or older.

During the program’s first year, participating schools lowered the mean sodium content served per lunch from 1,103 mg to 980 mg (–11.2%). During that same period, participating community meals programs reduced mean sodium content of meals served from 1,509 mg to 1,258 mg (–16.6%).

“Program activities focused on increasing the number of lower-sodium foods offered rather than restricting food choices,” said senior program director Chris Long, Ph.D. “Our findings highlight the potential effectiveness of sodium reduction interventions for schools and community meals programs.”

Although these initial results are promising, the article stated, evaluation of the remaining years of the project will determine whether reduction in sodium intake will be sustained, improved or eroded. During that time, UAMS will implement additional intervention components in both venues to promote even greater sodium reduction and add other Northwest Arkansas school districts. According to the article, UAMS and school district personnel aim to reduce sodium content of all entrées on the lunch menu to 480 mg or less.

The article, titled “Reducing the Intake of Sodium in Community Settings: Evaluation of Year One Activities in the Sodium Reduction in Communities Program, Arkansas, 2016–2017,” can be found online at https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2018/18_0310.htm. The researchers and co-authors include Chris Long, Ph.D.; Brett Rowland, M.A.; Krista Langston, MBA; Bonnie Faitak, M.A., M.Ed.; Karra Sparks, R.D.; Victoria Rowe, M.S.; and Pearl A. McElfish, Ph.D.

UAMS is the state’s only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. It is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 2,727 students, 870 medical residents and five dental residents. It is the state’s largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children’s Hospital, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health.

The UAMS Northwest Regional Campus includes 250 medical, pharmacy, nursing and health professions students, 50 medical and pharmacy residents, and 1,000 community-based faculty. The campus has nine clinics providing advanced health care. Faculty

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