

## FEATURE

## Want your teens healthy? Head back to the basics

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

Recommending that people exercise and eat well is "not rocket science," observed Dr. Megan Hess.

Yet the basics get ignored all too often, which is why she offered a seminar on "How to Raise a Healthy Teen-ager," June 26 at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira.

Hess, a family practitioner for the Twin Tiers Women's Health Team located at St. Joseph's, said unhealthy dieting is often connected with such eating disorders as anorexia and bulimia. But she noted that obesity among adolescents is actually a much greater problem, affecting 24 percent of all teens in the United States, whereas only 1 percent grapple with anorexia.

Hess said obesity in teens is fueled by busy lifestyles, in which families don't apply the time and expense necessary for healthy eating. "If you go and try to buy healthy foods it's more expensive; we don't have as many farmers markets. And if you don't eat fruits and vegetables quickly they get bad, and people don't have the time to go buy them two or three times a week," Hess said. Yet she also remarked that "20 to 25 years ago you had more moms in the home, so you had more moms cooking. Meat and potato wasn't the best diet either, but there was always a vegetable on the table."

These days, Hess said, "It's easier to drive through and grab something. It's going to be high fat and high calories. I think people are eating much less healthy."

Theresa Shock, a switchboard operator at St. Joseph's Hospital, attended Hess' lecture with her two daughters. Shock admitted that her family succumbs to fast food more often than she'd like. "We do that quite often," she said. But after hearing Hess' talk, Shock said she now thinks twice about such tendencies — especially since one of her children is overweight.

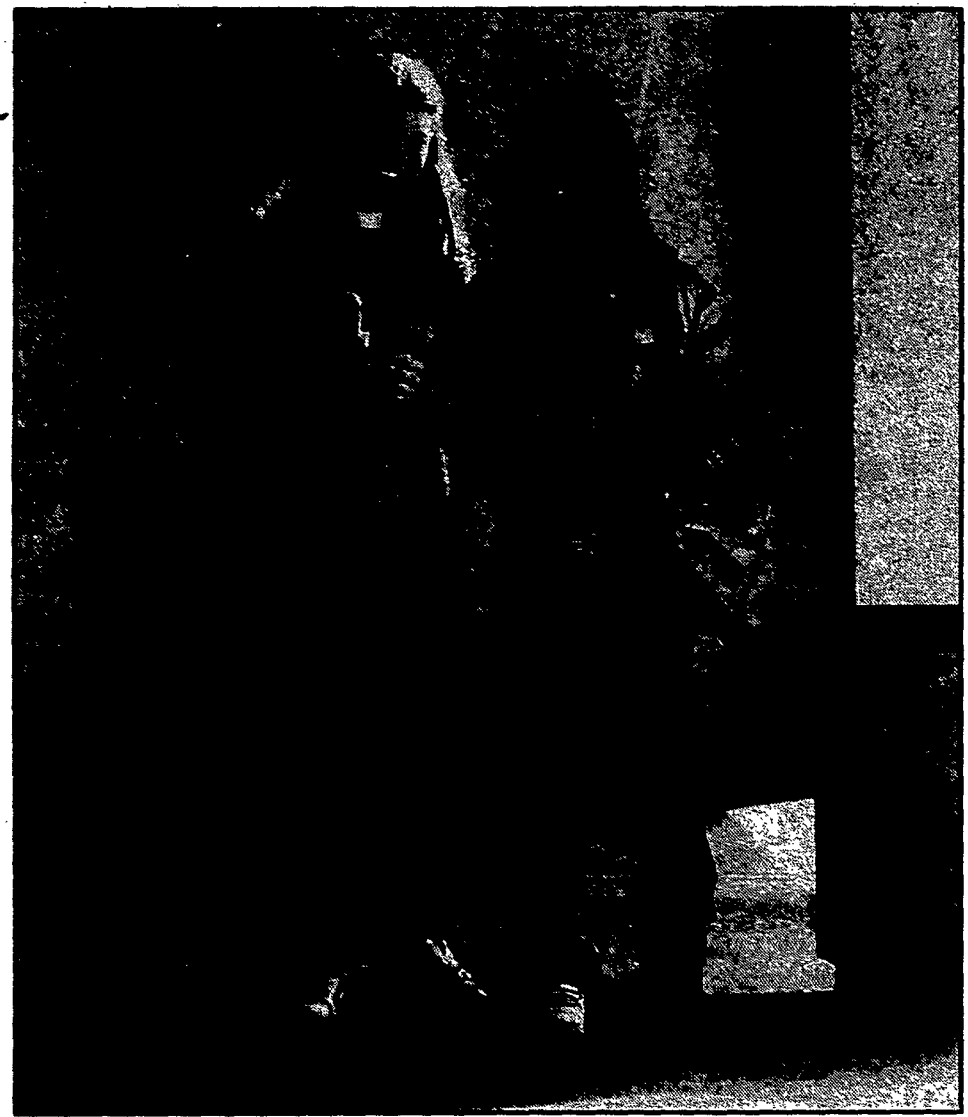
Hess also noted that bad diet habits are on the rise while exercise among teens continues to decline. Too often, Hess said, adults simply assume their children are getting enough exercise. "They think, 'They're kids, they run around.' But if they go to a friend's house, they play three hours of Sega," she said.

That point hit home to another lecture attendee, Teresa Fletcher. "The Internet, the computer and the TV — you have to set limits and say 'Get out and play,'" remarked Fletcher, a parishioner at All Saints in Corning. Fletcher is St. Joseph's Hospital's public relations/community development coordinator, but said she attended Hess' lecture "entirely as a concerned parent."

The best way to get your teens to eat and exercise better, Hess said, is to model those ideals. "You have to be diligent about the healthy lifestyle. You can't eat at a McDonald's and tell the kids to eat vegetables." She also suggested that "if you exercise as a family it's a lot easier. If you all play football or go for a hike or walk to the store together, they'll adopt that as a lifestyle." However, she said if a child gets a car for his or her 16th birthday, that sends a message that exercise isn't important.

In addition to the health risks connected with improper dieting and exercise, Hess said adolescents don't see doctors often enough — either for routine visits or when more serious problems may exist.

"There's not the regimented set of visits as there is for much younger kids," Hess said. "Your average healthy kid or teenager isn't getting seen unless they have a cold or something." Although many young people do undergo physicals



in order to play sports, Hess said this covers only a portion of the teen population.

She said parents should strive to get teens to doctors even for seemingly minor problems, rather than complain about the expense and the need to take time off from work. This willingness should also be apparent if a teen appears to be depressed or is exhibiting suicidal tendencies.

And, the teen should feel comfortable approaching his or her parents about any medical concerns, "such as a boy in the shower discovering a lump on his testicle," Hess said. "If parents can't answer that themselves, bring him to the doctor."

Open discussion should apply as well to such sexual topics as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. "(Parents) need to have an environment in their

household where their child feels comfortable bringing their concern to them," Hess said. She added that "if you have a kid who has a healthy self-esteem and ego, you're going to be able to talk to them easier."

Hess' presentation also touched on such aspects of preventive care as wearing bicycle helmets and seat belts, and refraining from smoking or drinking. Aware that some adolescents may take issue with these reminders, Hess — who has three children of her own — suggested that parents be prepared to cite statistics.

"Three hundred thousand people a year die from second-hand smoke in the United States. One-third of cancers are related to obesity. Some of this can give you ammunition when you get the 'Why, why, why,'" she said.



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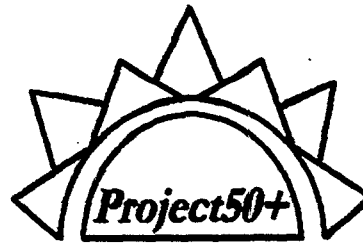
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