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The following is a transcript of Dr. Frank Meza's discussion about how exercise prevents and alleviates chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. Dr. Meza spoke to Metro employees who are members of the Transportation Communications Union at TCU's first health fair this month hosted by the union and Kaiser Permanente. Dr. Meza, MD, is the assistant medical director of Kaiser Permanente's Los Angeles Medical Center. The transcript is not verbatim, nor is it arranged in the order of the discussion.



State of health care and chronic illness in the United States

According to Circulation Magazine, the most prominent causes of death begin with poor dietary habits, smoking and inactivity.

We are spending a lot of money on diabetes and hypertension. When you bring new members to us, we monitor every record of diabetes and hypertension on a daily basis. We're doing a great job. However, we're going to run out of resources. Why? Because we keep getting more diabetics and more hypertensives.

Our bad habits and our children's health

Here's the tragedy. Your children today will not live as long as you do. We already know that. This is the first time in five generations this is going to happen in the United States. It's almost too late already. It's kind of sad. We're almost thinking of that next group behind them because this group is already too far gone. Why is that? Look at children in schoolyards today. Kids are not able to climb a tree or even run 100 yards -- they run out of breath.

You want your children safe so you don't let them go out, and they end up in front of the TV for an incredible amount of time. Genetically, this is bad because our bodies were designed to wake up when the sun comes up, and chase food or try to avoid from being eaten.

What do we do? We sit down all day. In fact, we avoid physical activity. We go to drive-throughs and park as close as possible to food places.

Researchers have pinpointed when the obesity rate began -- in 1966 when TV dinners were invented. Think of the concept. Before 1965, you guys actually cooked your own food. The idea was that you didn't have to cook and you could sit in front of the TV and eat your food, and that spawned other fast-food meals and restaurants.

The epidemic rates of obesity started skyrocketing. Other countries are now going through similar changes, such as China, where they have embraced fast-food lifestyles.

If we don't deal with this bottom tier (major causes of death), we don't have enough money to take care of diabetics.

The tragedy is that your children will have blindness and renal disease at age 40, where historically such diseases began at age 70. They will be having heart attacks at age 35 and 40. Why? Because they are starting the negative process at age 12. Does that make sense to you?

Our body was designed a certain way, whether you believe in God or not. We're violating the rules. We can't violate these rules. It's just how we were designed.

Overall 7 percent of the country's population is diabetic, while Latinos are nearly 15 percent, and African-Americans are higher than that.

The two groups being hit the hardest with diabetes are Latinos and African-Americans. And we're seeing younger and younger patients. Unfortunately, Asians and Caucasians are following right behind. All the bad habits, we're all kind of doing it together.

Studies have shown that there are more fast-food restaurants in poor communities, while at the same time there are fewer locations to purchase fresh produce.

We have to recognize the problem because if you depend on me as a physician to help solve the problem, I can't. I'm really good at managing diabetes and hypertension. But what about when it leads to more serious complications?

The ramifications are daunting. What happens when you have a whole bunch of people at 35 and 40 who can't work? Who is going to support them? That's very expensive. That's what we're starting to see. So it's a tragedy.



Exercise is the solution

So what if I told you that there was a pill that could cure 80 percent of cancer, 90 percent of diabetes, 90 percent of hypertension, cut heart attacks by 70 percent, make you more productive, decrease depression by 70 percent? If there was such a pill, you would take it. It's exercise.

We already know that.

Sixty-three percent of adults age 20 and above are overweight or obese -- that is two out of three.

People don't even know what normal is. We've lost sight of it. Normal is very little fat. We've studied the people who have lived to 130, 140. There are a few of them in Japan, some in Mexico. People who live to 120 to 130 around the world, they all have one thing in common. The reason they live that old is that they are that close to starvation and they exercise all day.

High blood pressure rates are now in 32 percent of the population. We're spending a fortune on high blood pressure. And what are we doing? Are we really saving your life? No, we're just prolonging it.

Exercise prevents depression, cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's, dementia. It leads to increased energy and improved sleep. You name it. The list is getting bigger and bigger.

Apparently, you could fudge on nutrition if you exercise the way the body is supposed to. When you're sedentary, it doesn't seem to know what to do with food. It stores it. We always think that we're different from animals. Somehow we've convinced ourselves.

Humans can be likened to bears who gorge all year waiting for winter. Something in their brain decreases their metabolic rate because they have to survive a winter with no food. They drop their metabolic rate really low so they could make it through three or four months of snow. We do that every day. So what are you doing when you're storing food? When you're eating all the time what is happening? Your metabolic rate is dropping because it thinks that you're getting ready to store. If you're exercising a lot, there's something in our brain that says, "We're OK, we're still moving, we're OK so we could burn fuel." When you stop moving, the brain goes, "OK, conserve because we're about to go into winter." Does that make sense to you?

So what do we do? We eat all the time and sit down. So your body is saying: store, store, store. So that's why when even you decrease the amount you're eating, you won't lose weight. You won't lose weight because your body is trying to save it because it thinks, "I'm not going to eat for the next three months." That's why you can't get around the exercise. You can't because it won't work.

If you're fit, the chance of developing diabetes drops dramatically.

If you exercise 180 minutes a week, your depression goes away. It was actually shown by mental-health institutions that people who did this got better and once they stopped, they got sick again. Why is that? Because the brain and body are connected.

You will say, "I'm too old to exercise." I'm here to tell you there are a group of people at age 60, 70 and 80 that are so fit that it is no big deal to run a marathon, no big deal to ride their bike 100 miles, no big deal to do a triathlon.

California's governor has instituted a program to get elementary school children fit. He agreed to provide \$100,000 per school for children to exercise three times a week for 30 minutes. The school must have 100 percent participation. It's a good investment. If you can invest that kind of

money and people really do it, you save a lot of money. You save really big bucks. Has it been working? Not quite yet, but that's what we're trying to do right now.

Our poor health conditions are spilling over to our pets. Now you're seeing that 25 to 40 percent of dogs are overweight.

The paradigm is that people think large and bulky and curvy is healthy, but it isn't. We're going to have to start switching that.

Ideally, everyone should exercise 30 minutes, five times a week.

If time is limited, you have to figure out how to maximize your time. Other tactics would be to get some of the exercise by parking far away from your destination or riding your bike to work.

If you keep saying "This is why I won't do it," you won't do it because you have a lot of reasons you can't do it.

When is the last time you even stretched for 10 minutes? The best investment you could make is to spend about \$125 for one hour to have a personal trainer give you a plan to follow so that you don't injure yourself.

Hopefully that trainer will be able to show you how to work out at home without buying any equipment. You could do all the strength exercises without equipment.

People have a tendency to skip days when they don't follow a daily regimen.

When it's every day, it's part of your life, the chances are you will continue.

Dr. Meza's regimen

I have a rule that if I don't run an hour a day, I don't eat that day. I have maintained this regimen for 35 years.

As you get older, you start gaining weight. People who become sedentary totally degenerate. People who sit home and watch TV get dementia quickly. Here's the scary thing. What about kids sitting in front of the TV? What about 12- and 15-year-olds just watching TV? What's happening to their brain? What if they start getting dementia at age 40? Right now we could get dementia at age 60 or 70. What happens at age 40? That's going to be a frightening thought. How do you get your metabolic rate up? Exercise.

If you depend on me to give you pills to prevent it, it won't. I can only put it off, but eventually you're going to get in trouble. The only way is exercising, stretching, exercise.

When you are in an active mode your brain thinks, "We need to work hard." So when you get to high levels of exercise, you'll forget to eat. It's part of the brain mechanism.

First step

Teach yourself to eat half of what you normally eat because I guarantee you it's enough. If you're going to go to McDonald's, cut the portion you're eating in half.

In my family, when three go to dinner, it's one plate with three salads.

We can make any restaurant family-style. My kids were born and raised under this. To them it's no big deal.

Kaiser Permanente's History

I will be talking about health disparities because the bottom line is when I'm talking about health, we might be talking about a different discussion here. Most people, let's say, before 1950, what people considered preventive health care was if you had an earache they took their child to the doctor. He gave them an antibiotic.

Why did Kaiser come into existence? In 1938 Henry J. Kaiser, world industrialist, was building an aqueduct to bring water to Los Angeles. He had thousands of workers who were there and they were getting sick. All he cared about was that his workers get back on the line to build a dam.

In doing so, he hired a few doctors who said, "I'll pay you if you keep my workers working. Later I'll pay for their children and their wives because if their families are sick, they won't be able to come and work either." He was doing it from a very pragmatic point of view. It worked really well. He was paying them like a quarter a week for the workers and another 10 cents for the kids and for their wives.

The project was over, everyone went home. The war broke out. All of a sudden Kaiser got shipyards and the war effort began. Women went to work and men went to fight. Kaiser got all the contracts for shipyards -- in Richmond, Calif., the shipyards, in Fontana the steel mills. All of a sudden, unionized labor had a friend -- a big industrialist who said he needed health care for his workers. He did invent prepaid health care to keep working-class people healthy so they could work.

This was considered communism at that time. In the 1940s, 1950s, this was considered creeping socialism by most people in the medical establishment. Kaiser doctors were banned from getting privileges at any hospital. And that's the only reason we built our own hospitals.

Things have changed now. All the people that didn't like us, the AMA (American Medical Assn.), the CMA (California Medical Assn.) now like us because we're pretty big. In California, we have 8,000 doctors, and in Southern California about 3,600 -- 12 major medical centers controlling about 20 percent of the market share. Kaiser has the only integrated health-care record (system) in the United States. Only the VA (Veteran's Affairs) is somewhat as integrated.

Currently, 15 percent of the gross national product in the United States is spent on health care. It's heading toward 18 percent very quickly. Of that, one-third of the money goes nowhere because it's redundant -- doctors and facilities are not talking to each other. One-third of the money goes nowhere. You have a fragmented health-care system here in the U.S. Specialist, primary care, pharmacy, laboratory, radiology and hospice. No one's really talking to each other. It's not their fault. How can you talk to each other if everyone has their own record (system)? And you're depending on people faxing or emailing or mailing each other information -- it's very inefficient. One-third of what we spend is totally wasted. We didn't talk about administration fees either. How much of that money is just totally wasted? So we're paying a lot of money and getting very little back.