

Lengthen Lifespan By Changing Lifestyles

If radical changes to our lifestyle and eating habits are not immediately adopted, there may be a dramatic increase in the number of cases of type 2 diabetes, and a shortening of the lifespan of Jamaicans.

This according to Dr. Steven Aldana, Professor of Health and Human Performance at Brigham Young University, Utah who spoke recently at the fourth annual Environmental Health Foundation Wellness & Lifestyle Awards ceremony at Eden Gardens in St. Andrew. During the event, awards for excellence were made to individuals and organisations for the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

CVM Television won in the Media category; the National Health Fund (NHF) in medicine and health Care; Dr. Henry Lowe in Education and Lifestyle Development; Dr. Steven Aldana in the Regional or International category; Patricia Fletcher was given the individual award while WISYNCO won in the company category.

Using data obtained from Jamaica's Ministry of Health and comparing it to data in the USA, Dr. Aldana stated that if serious consideration is not given to lifestyle changes which lead to more exercise and returning to the diets of our grandparents, with its emphasis on fruits, vegetables, ground provisions and whole grains, by the next five years Jamaica's life expectancy which has climbed steadily since independence, will for the first time see a decline meaning that the next generation will start experiencing a shorter lifespan.

Debunking the idea that people have fat genes Dr. Aldana pointed out through the use of available data, obesity is more environmental and lifestyle influenced than it is about genes. "Obesity," he declares, "is environmental."

The rise of the fast food industry, the rise of convenience food and entertainment leads to improper diets and sedentary lifestyles having a significant impact in the USA and the same is happening here and will not reverse if changes are not made. He noted that the worldwide spread of obesity is reducing the life expectancy of many groups of people, adding that it will reduce the life expectancy of men by 12 years and women by 14 years.

He further stated that there will be a rise of type 2 diabetes with associated problems of stroke, heart disease, amputations. He emphasized that the tendency towards obesity is not genetic. Through the use of photographs he demonstrated that even domesticated family pets are now suffering from obesity. Delving into the concept of "the compression of morbidity" Dr. Aldana put it this way: "I like to tell people that I'm going to live to be 94 years old and be snowboarding with my great-grandchildren when I hit a tree and die. I extended my life by making positive lifestyle choices; lived a higher quality of life; and then experienced a major event and I died. Basically, I compressed morbidity into to just a few seconds."

Though it's somewhat of an extreme case, it's basically how the compression of morbidity works. Compression of morbidity addresses the relationship between lifestyle habits and the time frame between chronic illness and death. In a typical life, individuals experience good and poor health. Later in life they experience a significant event—a broken hip, cancer, a first bypass, a stroke—at which point the quality of life and health status declines dramatically until the point of death, which typically occurs a few years later.

Compression of morbidity suggests that if a person improves their health behaviours, they'll live longer. He explained what happens if one has an extended life without healthy behaviours. That person, he noted, may experience the onset of major disability and then live longer, but disabled until they die. This is actually known as the expansion of morbidity, and it's not a great scenario because it suggests that the additional years of life are of poor quality. Compression of morbidity further suggests that if we live longer, reach a point in time where we have a major disabling event, but in this case, it happens much later in life and closer to the end of life.

"We live high-quality lives into our 80s, 90s, or maybe beyond; we have our first major event; and within a few years we're dead. That's the compression of morbidity: we squeeze that end of life illness period into a much shorter time close to death after a long, healthy life." Although he sounded the alarm, Dr. Aldana was of the opinion that all was not lost. He illustrated with available US health statistics why lifestyle and personal responsibility for one's nutrition makes a great difference. Singling out Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) in the USA, (he himself is not SDA) he stated that the health statistics for this group which promotes abstinence from tobacco, coffee, alcohol, fast foods, excessive eating and promote physical activity and vegetarianism, on average live 12 to 15 years longer than other Americans.

For non-SDA Americans the life expectancy for men is 74 compared to 85 for their Adventist counterparts and 76 for non-SDA women when compared to 86 for Adventist women: He emphasized that health lifestyle practices such as the liberal intake of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and regular exercise is the key to their longevity. He even demonstrated with

available data that there were even differences in lifespan among those SDAs who exercised and were vegetarians and those who did not exercise and consumed meat. Those who exercised and consumes fruits, vegetables and meat free diets lived longer.