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Free class aims to help Latinos manage diabetes

Providence's health classes offer information about how to control the disease with diet and exercise

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In a small classroom off Southeast Belmont Street, Matilde Flores holds up a tortilla with the circumference of a Big Wheel tire.

"How many of you have eaten a fast-food burrito?" she asks in Spanish, waving the tortilla next to her head. "This is the how big their tortillas are. How many servings of carbohydrates do you think this is?"

Flores, a community health coach with Metropolitan Family Service, has been co-teaching a health class for Latinos with diabetes for the past two years. Her colleague is a diabetes expert from Providence Health System.

Poor access to health care and higher rates of diabetes create the need for diabetes education classes such as hers in Portland's Latino community, Flores said.

"They have not come out with a real answer why Hispanics are at a higher risk for diabetes," Flores said. "I think in Mexico they are very active, they walk everywhere. Here, they come and they stop walking and they eat a lot of different foods and fast foods."

The free classes, paid for by Providence Health System, United Way and private contributions, are held weekly at the Metropolitan Family Service office in Southeast Portland. Participants come on a doctor's referral.

Most participants have Type II diabetes. The class goal is to help them use diet and exercise to control blood sugar.

Latinos are 1.5 times as likely to have diabetes as whites, and the death rate from diabetes in Latinos is 40 percent higher than the white death rate from the disease, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Latinos also have less access to health care than the general population, due in part to language barriers and economics, said Yves Lefranc, a referring family practice doctor for the program and the director of Providence Family Medicine Southeast.

"The reason to do this moneywise is you decrease visits to the E.R. and visits to the hospitals," he said. "You also decrease the risk of complications like heart attack or a need for dialysis."

About a third of Latinos in Oregon don't have health insurance, compared with 12 percent to 15 percent of the general population, Lefranc said. That figure does not include undocumented immigrants.

Economics and cultural food preferences lead Latino households to eat more carbohydrate-heavy foods such as rice, tortillas and beans, which can aggravate diabetes, Flores said. In her classes, participants learn about portion sizes and try incorporating more vegetables and lean protein in their diets.

"We just give them ideas that are easy using things they would probably have at home," Flores said.

Class participants also learn about easy ways to exercise, and they take a trip to the grocery store to scout ways to save money shopping for produce and meat.

Crispina Huazano came to Portland from Mexico three years ago. She lives in Southeast and makes her living doing child care. She was diagnosed with diabetes several years ago when she went to a clinic because of shaky hands and blurred vision. With medication and lifestyle changes, she was able to get the disease under control.

"I just ate too much, I didn't understand about portion sizes," she said, speaking through an interpreter. "Now, I eat more vegetables, and it has gotten much better."

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