

Health wellness expo targets diabetes obesity

Health, wellness expo targets diabetes, obesity Who can say no to a chair massage?

About 1,200 people took the time Wednesday to get a little smarter about their health.

The Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce's HealthSmart Interactive Health Wellness Expo temporarily transformed the Georgia Mountains Center into a one-stop shop on health topics.

Following a kickoff breakfast featuring a presentation by former NBA star Dominique Wilkins, crowds of visitors wandered through more than 70 exhibit booths, many of which offered free health screenings and other services.

They also attended seminars and demonstrations, and chowed down on healthy foods prepared by local restaurants.

And they left carrying goodie bags crammed with free samples, brochures and even customized reports on their own health status.

I think this is the best health fair I've ever seen, said Banks County resident Becky Sievers, who was on her way to attend a seminar on how to start a wellness program at work.

Her colleague at Georgia Mountains Regional Development Center, Danny Lewis of Gainesville, said employees were encouraged to visit the expo.

I think it's great that they (the Chamber) are offering this to the community, he said. I was looking for a chiropractor, and I found one (at one of the booths) here. And the food's not bad, either.

Lewis, who is diabetic, attended the morning seminar on diabetes risk and prevention.

Of course I've been to a diabetes educator before, but they had some really good information, he said. I learned about some new medications.

Hilda Lee of Gainesville attended both the diabetes seminar and one that followed on cardiovascular disease.

As I get older, I'm interested in learning more about a lot of different health issues, she said. It's good that they're doing this. I hope they do it again next year.

Mary Elizabeth Williams, manager of the Body Sanctuary on the downtown square, said business had been brisk at her booth, which shared space with the Healing Arts Spa.

Who can say no to a chair massage? she said. And having our booth right in front of the food (serving area) doesn't hurt! I think the restaurants have done a really good job of offering healthy alternatives.

More than just a health fair, the expo was intended to raise awareness for a communitywide wellness initiative in conjunction with Hall County's Vision 2030 project. Organizers decided to emphasize ways to fight diabetes and obesity, because the same behavior changes that can prevent type 2 diabetes will also help a person avoid heart disease and many other ailments.

Robyn Lynch, vice president of membership development for the chamber, said bringing in Wilkins as a speaker really helped draw attention to the event.

Wilkins, a former Atlanta Hawks forward, was diagnosed with diabetes about seven years ago.

I think it means something to people when they see that even a professional athlete is not immune to this disease, Lynch said.

About 200 people attended the breakfast to hear Wilkins, an adviser to Newt Gingrich's Center for Health Transformation, talk about living with diabetes. The basketball star then stayed at the expo through the lunch hour, signing autographs and answering questions.

Adjacent to Wilkins booth, more than 250 people went through a four-part diabetes screening, getting their height, weight, body-mass index, blood pressure and blood glucose checked. They also filled out a brief form that asked about their family history.

Those whose blood sugar tested high were offered a free glucose monitor and counseling with a diabetes educator.

Information from the forms will be collected anonymously and used to start building a demographic database on the health of people living in the Gainesville region.

With the cost of health care soaring, visitors seemed to welcome the opportunity to get medical testing done at no charge.

The carotid artery screening (offered by Northeast Georgia Heart Center) has had a line all day, Lynch said.

Lisa Kind, a chiropractor with Watkins Chiropractic in Gainesville, said many visitors stopped by her booth to have their posture analyzed by computer.

People love free screenings, she said. We can't do a specific diagnosis here, but we can give people a printout and show them areas where they may have a problem.

Kind said she was impressed by the diverse nature of the crowd Wednesday.

It's been all types of people: elderly, young folks, low-income, middle-income, she said. I think this was a really good location (for the expo), because it's accessible to everyone.

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