

## Mo. obesity rate rises for third straight year

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BY BILL DRAPER, The Associated Press

KANSAS CITY — A report issued Tuesday says that Missouri's obesity rate is rising and without increased government funding and community involvement, there's a fat chance that trend will change anytime soon.

A study by Trust for America's Health lists Missouri as the 13th most obese state in the nation, with 27.4 percent of its adult population obese and 63.3 percent either obese or overweight.

"Obesity is probably the largest public health problem facing our country and has the most dramatic impact on the conditions that are driving escalating health care costs," said Jeff Levi, executive director of Trust for America's Health. "We are now at two-thirds of the country overweight or obese. Some forecasts say that within the next decade that will be 75 percent. People are not leading as healthy lives as they could."

Mississippi led the nation with a 31.7 percent obesity rate, one of three states with an obesity rate higher than 30 percent. The other two were West Virginia and Alabama.

The report, dubbed "F is for Fat," uses a three-year average to determine obesity rates. It says only 22 states now have obesity rates less than 25 percent - down from 31 states the previous year. Colorado, at 18.4 percent, is the only state with an obesity rate of less than 20 percent.

Rising food costs, bigger portions and a lack of exercise all are blamed for the national increase. Part of the challenge is figuring out how to best fix the problem when government resources are tight, the report said.

Rep. Craig Bland, a Kansas City Democrat, has tried for three years to get obesity legislation through the Missouri House. During this year's session, he offered a bill to establish a state obesity commission and another to create a health board dealing with nutrition in schools.

Neither bill made it out of committee.

"I look around my community and this obesity thing is out of control," said Bland, who is term-limited but hopes he can pass his legislation on to his successor on the Health Care Policy Committee.

He said the obesity issue caught his attention after former President Bill

Clinton had heart surgery in 2004.

Pat Kramer, a nutrition specialist with the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, said the Missouri Council for Activity and Nutrition is a state initiative to promote healthy lifestyles, including nutrition and exercise. The council, comprised of several state agencies, has developed a unified plan to help communities create environments for healthy living.

"We are just now getting more into implementation where we are seeing things happen," Kramer said. "But we are going to see changes in some of the target behaviors before we see changes in obesity rates."

Kathryn DeForest, senior program manager with Missouri Foundation for Health and chairwoman of the council for activity and nutrition, said the group is working with 30 communities to develop strategies to combat obesity. She said much of the focus is on helping communities promote healthy habits and providing a means for them to change societal norms.

"All kinds of social change takes time," DeForest said. "The more people we have working on it, the farther we get down the road."

Calling obesity an epidemic, Levi said it will take a lot more federal money before the tide can be turned in the battle of the bulge.

"Funding over the last few years has been going down for obesity efforts," he said. "If we take seriously the notion that this is a major public health crisis, we need to invest more money."

While Levi acknowledged an increased awareness of the obesity issue, he said economic factors are preventing some people from changing their eating habits because they simply can't afford it.

"Unfortunately, the healthier food is often more expensive," he said. "Poverty programs like food stamps don't adapt for that."

According to the report, obesity can result in ailments such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. While people are more aware of the dangers of obesity, many just don't have the tools to make the needed lifestyle changes, Levi said.

"We live in a society that does not encourage or promote the kind of behavior that makes a difference," he said. "We have to do a better job of helping them make healthy choices."

"If you go into a restaurant and have to guess what is the healthier choice,

that's not the place to be. If you are in a community without sidewalks, that's not a place to be. But when we make it easier for people to make healthy choices, that's a different story."