

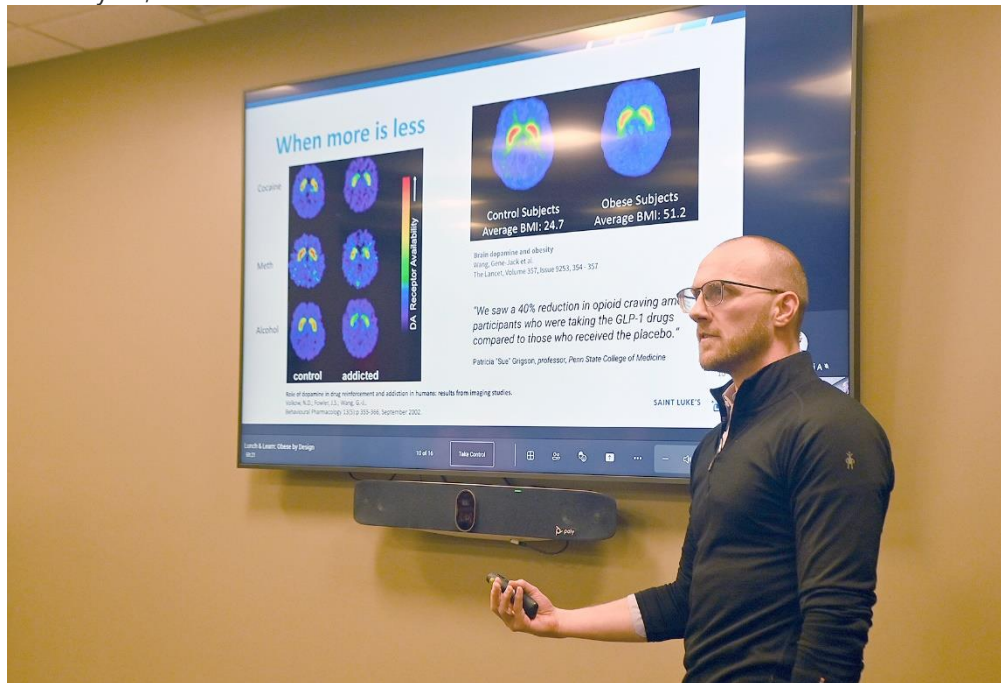
# Lunch & Learn tackles weighty subject — obesity

*Addressing obesity is not a one-size-fits-all approach, Dr. Sam Wilcox told a capacity Lunch & Learn crowd that squeezed into a hospital conference room in Lola Wednesday. Wilcox gave the audience plenty to chew on as he examined varying factors that feed the ongoing health issue.*

By SARAH HANEY

## **LOCAL NEWS**

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Dr. Samuel Wilcox explains the impact food addiction has on obesity during Wednesday's Lunch & Learn at Allen County Regional Hospital. *Photo by Sarah Haney / Lola Register*

"Knowing what to do is easier if we start out understanding how we got there," said Dr. Sam Wilcox about obesity.

Board certified in both family and obesity medicine, Wilcox gave a presentation on obesity, its causes, and treatment at Wednesday's "Lunch & Learn" event at Allen County Regional Hospital.

The room was at full capacity for the discussion, which also served as the first "Lunch & Learn" held since pre-COVID pandemic.

Wilcox, on staff at the hospital, explained that obesity is caused not by one specific thing, but perhaps a long list of factors.

“Some factors we may be able to adjust, while others we might not have as much control over,” he said.

Addressing obesity isn’t a one-size-fits-all endeavor. According to Wilcox, the general guidance a lot of people get is to eat less and exercise more. “There are better ways to approach that,” he said.

“Obesity is very widespread,” said Wilcox. “More people are obese or overweight than are normal weight. Actually, more than double.”

Portion sizes are a common factor, he pointed out. He noted that the size of meals have gotten increasingly larger over the years, while the recommended serving size has remained the same. This is especially noticeable when going out to eat at restaurants. “People want to see a bigger plate of food — it feels like more value,” he explained. “It makes people feel like they are getting more bang for their buck.”

Additionally, Wilcox says most people have difficulty putting food in the trash. “When more food is put in front of them, people are just eating more and more,” he said.

As the portions get larger, they far exceed the recommended serving size put forth by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA). People don’t tend to think about serving sizes when they are preparing or ordering food, noted Wilcox. “When portion sizes are increasing everywhere, it just becomes normal,” he said. “We don’t even think about it. It’s just, ‘I ordered a serving and I got a serving. It was huge and I ate it all.’ That’s what we do.”

**A GENERAL** lack of awareness of how healthy things are is another factor. Wilcox gave an example of when a patient told him she always has a daily coffee.

“I asked her what kind of coffee and she told me it was this extra-large mocha that has around 500 calories,” he said. “For her, that was a third of the calories that she needs for the entire day.”

Nutritional information for fast-food, restaurant, or coffee chains can typically be found online and Wilcox suggests that people check there prior to ordering out.

Taking in extra calories, combined with moving less, is a very common path that leads to obesity. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), half of teens get more than four hours of screen time daily.

“This is outside of school work,” said Wilcox. “In school, they sit all day and every hour they get five minutes to walk to their next class. It’s teaching us to be sedentary and that’s a hard habit to break.”

It's not just kids. Only about a quarter of adults meet physical activity guidelines. In general, adults are recommended to get two-and-a-half hours of moderate activity per week.

"That's things like walking at a brisk pace or 75 minutes of more vigorous activity each week along with resistance training to build muscle," Wilcox said.

"We eat too much of the wrong things," Wilcox continued. "We sit too much and spend too much time on our phones."

"Many of us do — and that's normal. A normal person wakes up tired, goes to work, and comes home tired. They eat some fast food on the way home and in that one meal they are getting at least half of the calories they need for the day. Once home, they stay up too late sitting and watching TV then go to bed and wake up the next day tired again. That's become normal."

Even though he considers himself a healthy person, Wilcox says he struggles with these same issues.

He walks to and from work each day, but once he gets there he is usually sitting. "I walk from one clinic room to the next one and then I sit down for a while," he said.

"There has to be a concerted effort to make sure we are getting more physical activity."

Obesity comes with stigma, said Wilcox. People with extra pounds feel people are looking at them critically, which leads to more stress. The stress that they feel then leads to stress eating, poor sleep, increased cortisol, impulsiveness and less physical activity. All of these are a part of what Wilcox calls the "shame cycle." Ultimately, all of these factors circle back and result in obesity.

Limited access is another issue when it comes to food. He pointed out that having two grocery stores in Iola presents more options to people, but it is still limiting.

"I go to G&W probably half the days of the week to get my lunch. It's helped a lot and it's definitely good for our community," he said. He noted that the highway that runs along G&W may cause an obstacle for those who live on the other side who don't have transportation.

"It may be easier for them to stop somewhere like Casey's where they smell the pizza and doughnuts," he said. "Maybe we need a little island to make crossing the highway easier."

**A MAJOR** factor in obesity is food addiction, noted Wilcox. "It's still up for debate, but I believe that's the case," he said.

He presented evidence of this via brain scans of individuals who are addicted to drugs or alcohol compared to control brain scans. The scans of the addicted brains showed less dopamine receptor availability than the control scans. “The fewer receptors you have, the less of a signal you’re going to get,” he added.

Essentially, each time a person abuses drugs or alcohol, the substance triggers the release of an intense amount of dopamine. Serving as a chemical messenger to the brain, dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is released when we experience pleasurable activities.

Without the reinforcement of the drug or alcohol, the dopamine receptors are low in the addicted individual.

Wilcox then showed a brain scan of someone with obesity. “We see a pretty similar picture in obese subjects versus control subjects when we look at the number of dopamine receptors,” he said. “This suggests that some of the changes in the brain that take place with obesity are similar to other addictions.”

**SOME NEWER** medications are helping combat these food addictions and are putting a dent in the rise of obesity. A class of drugs called Glucagon-Like Peptide-1 (GLP-1) have shown promising results. GLP-1 is a naturally occurring hormone that plays a crucial role in regulating blood sugar levels, appetite, and digestion. One study from the Penn State College of Medicine showed a 40% reduction in opioid craving among participants who were taking the GLP-1 drugs compared to those who received a placebo.

“These GLP-1 drugs are things like Mounjaro, Wegovy, Zepbound, and Ozempic,” said Wilcox. “One of the main things you’ll hear from people on these drugs is that there is less ‘food noise.’”

“Food noise” is the intrusive and persistent thinking about food that can interfere with daily life and eating habits. “I have also heard from a lot of my patients who are on these drugs that they’ve cut down on their drinking and smoking,” he added. “It seems to be working on addiction in general.”

These medicines can come at a high cost. Insurance may cover a large portion of the cost if the patient is excessively obese, diabetic or has some other comorbidity.

**The hospital** plans to continue having Lunch & Learn events on a variety of topics.

For those interested. The events are free, but reservations are required. For more information, call 620-365-1021.