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EAT RIGHT MONTANA

A coalition promoting healthy eating and active lifestyles

www.eatrightmontana.org

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MT Department of Public Health & Human Services

October 2010

Safe Routes to School Improve Quality of Life for Montanans

Ah October in Montana! Fall is definitely here with final harvests in the farmers' markets, crisp mornings, cooler evenings, and families settled into their school day routines. For more and more Montana families, those routines include walking or biking to school - good for kids and communities as well.

"Walking and biking to school offers significant health benefits to individual children," says Kathy Aragon, Safe Routes to School (SRTS) State Network Organizer for Montana. "Beyond individual fitness, providing safe ways for youth to walk or bike to school is a really a quality of life issue for everyone. SRTS help make cities and towns healthier places to work and play, which is good for the whole community."

Getting to school on your own two legs used to be the norm for most American children. Currently, nearly 60 percent of children are driven to school in private cars - often for trips of a mile or less. Switching to leg or pedal power can help kids accumulate the 60 minutes of daily physical activity that they need for optimal health and to maintain a healthy weight. Research has shown that being physically fit may also help improve school performance, including standardized test scores and grade point averages.

SRTS also provide significant benefits to the environment, especially near school buildings. "When children lace up their sneakers or strap on a bike helmet instead of jumping in the car, it reduces the amount of air pollutants emitted by automobile exhaust," notes Aragon. "This pollution is particularly harmful to young children and anyone with respiratory problems like asthma. Creating safer streets for kids encourages other people to do more walking and biking, which helps to reduce car emissions and air pollution even more."

In January 2010, Montana was one of 20 states selected to participate in the State Network Project for SRTS, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Kaiser Permanente. With the sponsorship of Eat Right Montana, the Montana SRTS Network Project works with partners in health, education, planning, and transportation to make communities more walkable and bikeable for school children. According to Aragon, Florence, Montana, is an excellent example of what a community can do when everyone works together.

"Florence formed a SRTS committee of parents, teachers, and others to spread the word about walking and bicycling to school. All elementary health teachers participated in a 20-hour traffic education training and taught three weeks of classes about biking and walking skills," she explains. In addition to education, Free Cycles of Missoula collected over 180 recycled bicycles for the Florence Physical Education Program. The Florence Civic Club donated funds for parts and supplies, while community members volunteered to paint and restore the bicycles. Now, the entire Florence community reaps the benefit of more kids biking to school.

Walk to School Day is October 6, 2010, and many Montana schools will have festivities. For more info, go to www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/saferoutes or contact Kathy Aragon at Montana@saferoutespartnership.org.

Past and current issues of Eat Right Montana's monthly packets can be downloaded for free at www.eatrightmontana.org/eatrighthealthyfamilies.htm

Treasure Your Family's Health: Back-to-Basics 2010