

Medicare Obesity Counseling Available Through Perham Health*

"It's really personalized. [Our dietitian] is always asking if we have any questions, and it's just for us."

Linda Kaluza, Patient
Perham Health



Linda and Ray Kaluza

Individuals who are eligible for Medicare and are clinically obese have a new, non-surgical program option available to try to lose weight. Introduced and encouraged by *PartnerSHIP 4 Health*, this program pairs primary care physicians and dieticians who will work to help patients make changes to their lifestyle and eating habits, hopefully resulting in gradual, healthy weight loss.

After the physician determines a person has a body mass index of 30 or greater, that individual can be referred into the program.

"They see me once a week for the first month, and every-other week for the next five months," explained Perham Health dietitian Gwen Horter. "If, by that point, they've lost 6.6 pounds (a marker set by Medicare) at the six-month mark, then they can come back once a month for the next six months."

"A few of our physicians have been really great about referrals," Horter said, of attempts to spread the word about the program. "It's win/win all over the place. There's no out-of-pocket expense for the Medicare patient – there's no co-pay or anything. I don't know why anybody wouldn't participate in it."

However, according to Perham Health's records, many people who are eligible for the program have not been using it. Horter said, since June of 2014, she has had 27 people enroll in the program – six dropped out.

Of patients seen at Perham Health's clinics in Perham, New York Mills and Ottertail – records showed that 1,229 people would fit into the two requirements as of June 2014. This does not include other people in the area who do not use the Perham Health system.

"It is a time commitment," Horter said of the 15-minute appointments she has with program participants. "It's also patient driven. We start with basic nutrition ideas, just basic things. Then, if they have specific questions... whatever might be their personal challenges, it kind of covers whatever."

Horter said there are no medications involved in the program – just the lifestyle changes.

Ray and Linda Kaluza joined the counseling program in September of 2014, and were interviewed by the Focus in March. Linda said they learned about the program after seeing a flyer in the Perham clinic while Ray was meeting with a different counselor for his diabetes.

After getting referred into the program by their doctor, the Kaluzas started meeting with Horter. "It's really personalized," Linda said of what she likes about the obesity counseling program. "She (Horter) is always asking if we have any questions, and it's just for us." For example, Linda said, Horter has been helping to figure out modified, healthier versions for favorite recipes and planning better meals.

"She's really given us a lot of information," Ray added. "I think, if I would have had this program 10 years ago, I possibly wouldn't be a diabetic."

Linda said a big change Horter encouraged them to make is making more food from home-made, rather than out of a can or at restaurants. While a lot of advice is given, the Kaluzas agreed that the program and Horter provide encouragement rather than pressure.

"We have a lot of options," Ray said of the recommended foods. "It's not just 'You should be eating onions,' or something. There are a lot of suggestions of what we can do. It's a lot of simple things – rather than setting the goal way up here," Ray said, gesturing over his head. Linda said she is a "chocoholic" and that Horter found her a chocolate protein bar she could enjoy as a snack every day, to avoid cravings.

When interviewed, Linda said she had lost about 40 pounds while on the program. Ray had not lost as much weight, but said he was told that his medications often cause 15 pounds of weight gain, which he had avoided so far. "There really are a lot of options, which really makes it a program you can follow," Ray said. "I've learned quite a bit. It's a very worthwhile program".

Supported by the Statewide Health Improvement Program,
Minnesota Department of Health

*Article written by Elizabeth Huwe

*Article published in the Perham Focus on June 4, 2015

