

BEATING HEART DISEASE

Fresno Unified wellness program helps employees get fit.

BY BARBARA ANDERSON

The Fresno Bee

Some ran, others walked and more than one jogged behind a baby stroller along the Fresno-Clovis Rail Trail.

Fitness, not speed, was a goal last month at a 5K run/walk for Fresno Unified School District employees.

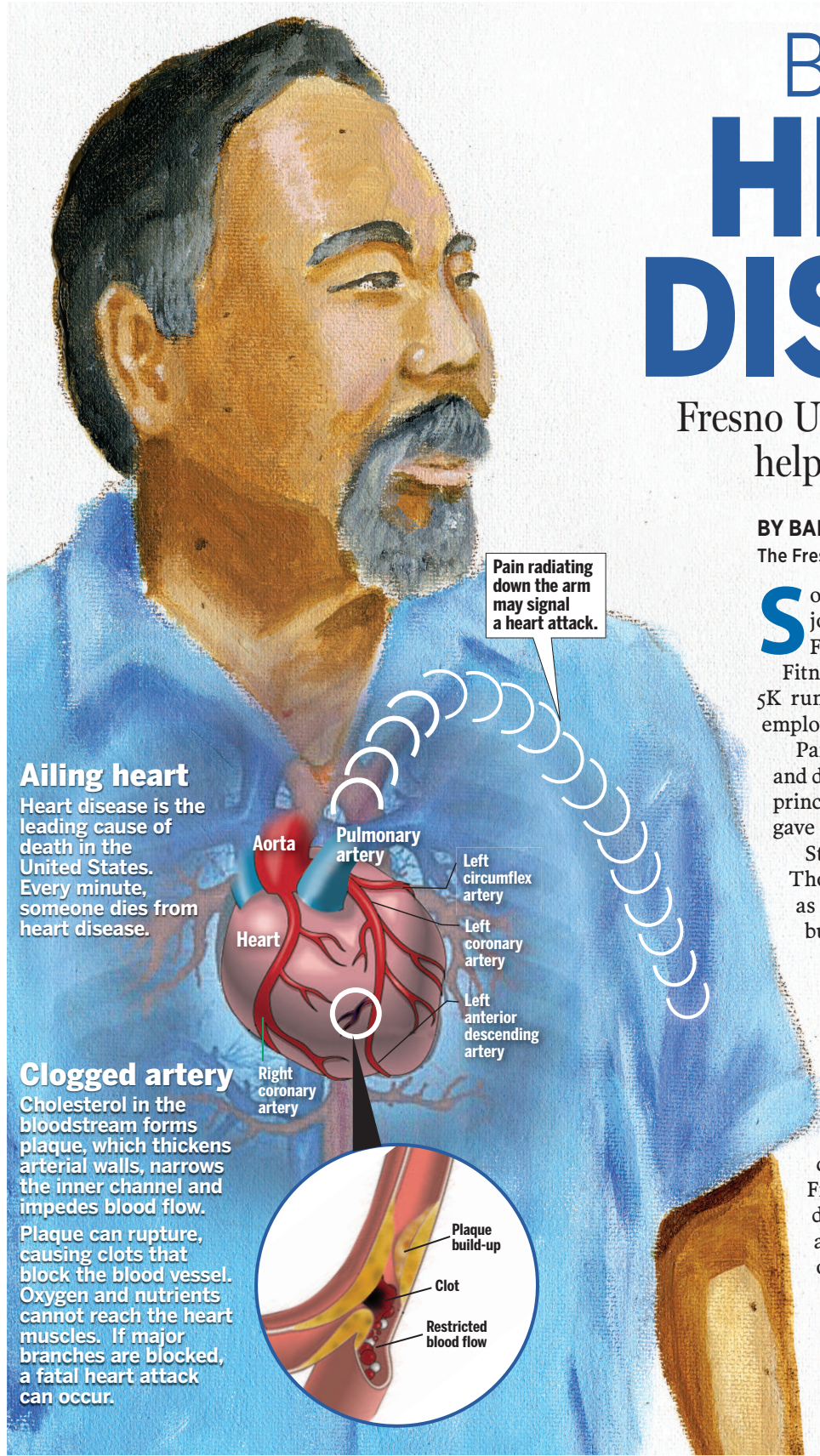
Participants, who included classroom aides and district office workers, as well as teachers and principals, were at all levels of fitness. The event gave everyone a chance to get some exercise.

Stephanie Frazier, a first-grade teacher at Thomas Elementary, pushed a double stroller as she ran. Macy, 3 1/2, handled the run well, but Levi, 4 months, “cried through half of it.”

Providing exercise opportunities for employees and family members is a mission of WellPATH, the district’s wellness program, which was created three years ago to improve health and reduce medical costs.

Wellness activities are designed to help participants prevent or manage chronic illnesses, such as heart disease. In Fresno County, treatment for cardiovascular disease cost more than \$808 million in 2010, according to a study published in the Journal of Public Health Management & Practice.

WellPATH offers employees a personal wellness appraisal, which includes three tests that are keystones for the early detection and prevention of heart disease: body fat, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. A wellness coach is available to give

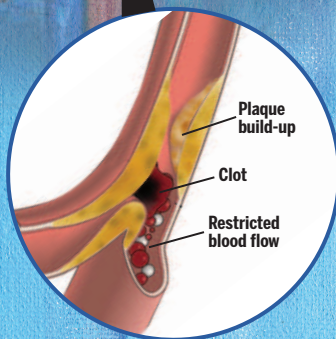


Ailing heart

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. Every minute, someone dies from heart disease.

Clogged artery

Cholesterol in the bloodstream forms plaque, which thickens arterial walls, narrows the inner channel and impedes blood flow. Plaque can rupture, causing clots that block the blood vessel. Oxygen and nutrients cannot reach the heart muscles. If major branches are blocked, a fatal heart attack can occur.





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Brian Boroski, from left, and his wife, Fresno Unified employee Kristen Boroski, cross the finish line with district employee Grady Lane at a 5K run/walk at Railroad Park in Clovis. Fresno Unified has an employee wellness program that includes incentives for getting healthy and extra doctor and nurse involvement.

tips on diet, exercise and other lifestyle changes to help participants lose weight, lower cholesterol and control blood pressure.

About 21,000 employees, family members and retirees are eligible for the wellness classes and health services. The school district also has about 3,800 who participate in a disease management program. They have primary care doctors who agree to keep tabs on their health, such as cholesterol and blood pressure, and report findings to the district's Joint Health Management Board, which manages employee and retiree health benefits.

Participants are overseen by registered nurses who help manage patient care between doctor visits. "It's that extra hand-holding and relationship building that is missing from the medical system," said

■ **Providing fitness classes at schools results in healthier Fresno Unified School District employees.**

■ **Yoga and Zumba classes are favorites of employees who request on-site workouts.**

■ **Health and wellness programs target heart disease and other chronic illnesses for prevention and intervention.**

Devon Devine of Claremont Partners, consultant to the Joint Health Management Board.

The idea is to keep people healthy and reduce health-care costs.

The program has been successful, Devine said. "We ended up paying the physicians about \$12 per month for this set of services, and when we compared the members who received the services to others who didn't, the total cost savings was like \$20 per member per month."

Last January, the health management board reported that Fresno Unified had saved more than \$100 million in health-care costs since 2006. While employee monthly premiums did increase, other out-of-pocket expenses remained nearly flat.

The district's wellness program is an integral part of that success.

For example, Fresno Unified offers cardiovascular workout classes at schools and other district sites that help employees stay fit. It also sponsors weight-loss and walk-

WellPATH Fresno Unified School District employee wellness program

Goals: Improve health, decrease health-care costs, empower employees with tools to improve their health.

Funding: \$340,000 from the Joint Health Management Board, which manages district employee and retiree health benefits.

Eligibility: Fresno Unified employees and spouses, domestic partners, adult dependent children; retirees.

Services: Health screenings, counseling for weight loss, exercise classes, physical activity programs, wellness incentives.

Source: Joint Health Management Board

Preventing heart disease

- Know your blood pressure and keep it under control.
- Exercise regularly.
- Don't smoke.
- Get tested for diabetes; if you have it, keep it under control.
- Know your cholesterol and triglycerides levels and keep them under control.
- Eat a lot of fruits and vegetables.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

Source: MedLine Plus

Blood pressure

Blood pressure kept in a healthy range:

- Reduces the risk of overstretching blood vessel walls.
- Reduces the risk of a heart attack or stroke, and of developing heart failure, kidney failure and peripheral vascular disease.
- Protects the body so that tissues receive regular supplies of blood that is rich in oxygen.

Source: American Heart Association

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ing challenges. The challenges include incentives — teams can win gift cards and the winning school site gets a \$500 stipend to buy health and wellness supplies.

WellPATH focuses on prevention, and the primary care program focuses on disease management, which are both crucial to the success of a work site wellness program, said Brianne Jackson, the district's wellness director.

The program offers group health and wellness workshops, seminars and webinars, but employees also can request classes be taught at schools and other work locations. Providing health and fitness activities at more than 100 work sites is not

an easy task, but "it's worked quite well bringing the services to employees," Jackson said.

Yoga and Zumba have been the most popular with Fresno Unified employees.

At Tioga Middle School in central Fresno, employees started an exercise class that meets Mondays and Wednesdays after school in the school's health and fitness center. The class is taught by Ed Hagopian, who works with students who have autism. Hagopian, who is also a certified exercise instructor, donates his time to lead the workout: "I do it as a team member at Tioga."

Last Monday, the Tioga exercisers ranged from math and English teachers to Vice Principal Jennifer Bacon and office manager Elisa Ortiz.

"Hup! Hup!" Hagopian shouted to spur the class to keep moving.

By the end of the class, Ortiz, 43, was dripping in sweat. She said she joined the workout because she needed to lose some weight. She stopped smoking nine months ago after being a smoker for 13 years. Heart disease runs in her family, so doing a cardiovascular workout also made sense, she said. "I decided, 'I've got to change my life and do something different and get back into shape and be a little more healthy.'"

Having an exercise class at school makes it easy to participate, said Teresa Scharnick, 60, a Tioga math teacher who had tried to exercise at home. "I bought exercise tapes and watched them once or twice, and that was the end of that."

Contact Barbara Anderson: banderson@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6310 or @beehealthwriter on Twitter.

April 12: Asthma
April 19: Diabetes
Today: Heart disease
May 3: Obesity

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 **Claremont Partners**
www.claremontpartners.net
ddevine@claremontpartners.net
(408) 607-1076