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## Nutrition, exercise program aims to improve health of Watsonville farmworkers

*By*

By Donna Jones

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**WATSONVILLE** >> Latinos are suffering from an epidemic of obesity and diabetes, and the farmworkers who produce the nation's fruits and vegetables may be the hardest hit.

A new study seeks to find out whether a nutrition and exercise program brought to farmworkers in the fields can prevent the diseases and benefit employers by providing a healthier, more stable labor force.

The study, funded by a \$3 million grant from the Institute of Diabetes, Digestive and Kidney Diseases, is being conducted in the Watsonville-Salinas area through a partnership of UC Davis's Public Health Sciences, UC Berkeley's Health Initiative of the Americas, and berry grower Reiter Affiliated Companies.

"Farmworkers are concerned about their health and they want to do things to improve it," said UC Davis researcher Marc Schenker. "You can't just take a program off the shelf for suburban housewives, and say 'let's do this.' It doesn't work."

Little study has been done to assess just how bad the problem is, Schenker said. But he found more than 85 percent of farmworkers he studied over multiple years were obese or overweight.

"It's perhaps greater than the Latino population at large," he said.

The study is the first to evaluate whether health benefits from interventions in the field persist in the long term. Workers will be followed for 18 months.

If successful, researchers hope to spread the program throughout California and to other states.

Reiter, which markets its berries under the Driscoll's label, has been concerned about worker health for several years, said Veronica Vera-Vargas, manager of the company's Sembrando Salud — sowing health — program. The study gives the company the chance to see if the program it created to provide nutritional guidance and exercise opportunities is working.

From a pilot project with 150 participants in 2009, the program has expanded to 10 ranches in the Watsonville-Salinas area this year. The goal, Vera-Vargas said, is to create healthy communities at all the company's ranches in the area and in Oxnard and Santa Maria.

Vera-Vargas said immigrant workers left behind healthier food when they came to the United States, snacking on French fries instead of lime- and chili-laced slices of fresh fruit and trading the fruit-based agua frescas of their home country for sugar-laden sodas. They replaced baked beans with fried, and corn tortillas with flour.

Habits changed as well. The program encourages workers to return to their roots, Vera-Vargas said.

"When we were in Mexico, people used to walk all over the place," she said. "Let's go back to that, and also to the great nutritional food, the variety of beans, like lentils, that are so popular in Mexico."

The program encourages exercise with activities like hiking and Zumba.

Xochitl Castaneda, director of the Health Initiative of the Americas at UC Berkeley, said the program was designed to appeal to the culture of the immigrants and to be fun so workers would be motivated to be active after 10-hour shifts in the fields.

With its Latin American-inspired rhythms Zumba, for example, resonates with culture, Castaneda said.

"It brings joy and builds stamina," she said.

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