

By Patti Sayle, Assistant Editor, *Diabetes Dialogue*

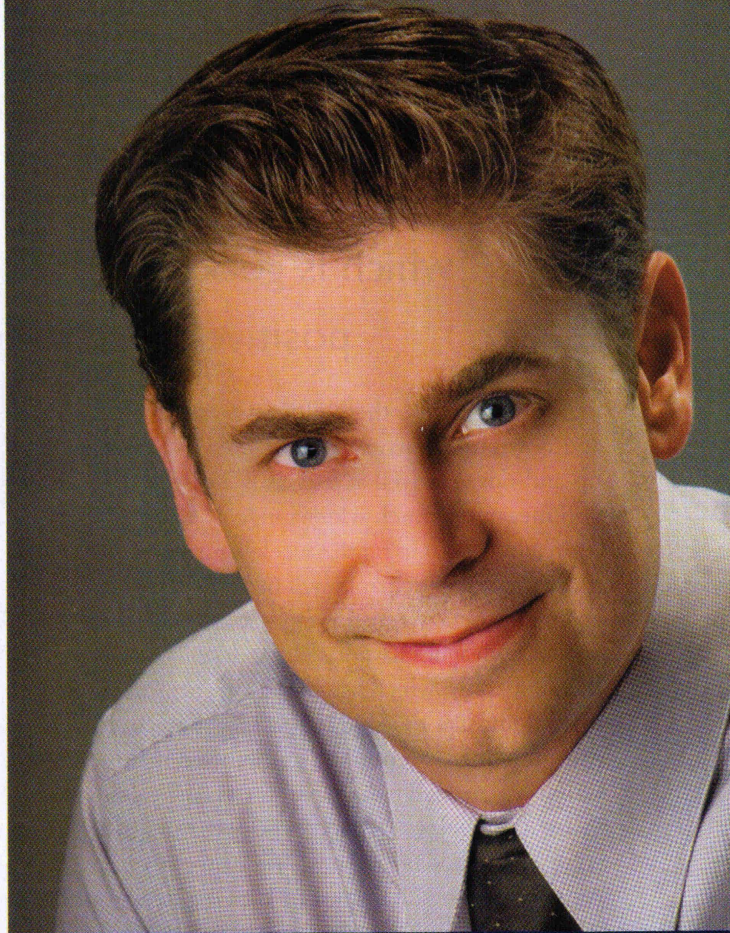
Juggling act

Dr. Ryan Rhodes is looking for ways new parents can look after their health, while keeping so many other balls in the air.

MAKING THE TRANSITION into parenthood can be difficult; people often feel that they are burning the candle at both ends, and that they have very little time for themselves. The sudden loss of leisure time, and sleep deprivation, are two of the reasons why so many people stop exercising and start eating less nutritious, more calorie-dense convenience foods (a lifestyle change that could increase their risk of developing type 2 diabetes). Dr. Ryan Rhodes, a PhD researcher at the University of Victoria, is conducting a study to explore the specific reasons for the decrease in healthy habits during this transition, in order to build a better understanding of the pressures that many new parents face, so they can receive greater societal and personal support to help them maintain their health, while enjoying parenthood.

Even though the benefits of physical activity are well known to many both in the healthcare community and outside of it, getting people to stick to an exercise program can be problematic. Dr. Rhodes is the first to admit that maintaining an exercise routine is difficult: "I'm a regular exerciser," he says, "but sometimes I struggle with it as much as anyone." This is one of the most pervasive problems with physical activity promotion and adherence, he admits.

Dr. Rhodes, the father of two children (a four-year-old and an 18-month old), knows first-hand how hard it can be for parents to maintain their own health. "I was warned about how difficult it would be in the prenatal classes, but I was still surprised by just how much organization and motivation is needed to look after yourself once you're a parent," he explains. Being a new parent means that focus tends to be on the child and ensuring that they are healthy and well cared for. Parents need to understand that maintaining their own health also benefits their children.



Dr. Ryan Rhodes maintains his health by protecting his family and personal time.

Dr. Rhodes' study will be one of the first to examine participants' choices through their transition to parenthood. Participants will be followed over 18 months, covering the months directly preceding and following the birth of their first child, to evaluate the changes that occur in their eating and physical activity behaviours. These behaviours will then be compared to age- and gender-matched couples who do not have children. The study will also assess a number of social, personal and environmental factors. "If we can predict and understand what leads to a decrease in healthy behaviours over this transition, we can design better programs to help new parents maintain their lifestyle through the transition to parenthood," he explains.

According to Dr. Rhodes, the biggest reason why many new parents gain weight is because they stop being physically active. Study participants will use an accelerometer to measure their activity level. The accelerometer is a more sophisticated version of a

The work done by Dr. Ryan Rhodes and his colleagues is just one example of leading-edge research funded by the Canadian Diabetes Association, and your donations.

PHOTO: WWW.FRANCISLITMAN.COM

“New parents have taken a real interest in this study, which is good, since it shows that they are taking positive steps to protect their health.”

pedometer; while the pedometer measures only up-and-down movements, the accelerometer will measure up-and-down as well as forwards-and-backwards, so it will measure a much wider range of physical activity.

In addition to using the accelerometer to track physical activity, participants will be required to do a fairly stringent dietary recall every six months. Dr. Rhodes and his colleagues have based the design of this study on the pilot study, which has already been completed. The pilot study, like this one, targeted young adults as they transition into parenthood, and showed that more education was needed to help parents make healthier choices for themselves. “Based on the results of the pilot study,” Dr. Rhodes explains, “we expect to see a 50 per cent drop in regular physical activity, for people who were physically active before becoming parents.” According to the results of the pilot study, many people who stop being active after the birth of their first child still have not resumed their previous level of physical activity four years later.

“Support may be the major predictor here,” Dr. Rhodes explains. “People who have adequate spousal and family support may be more likely to maintain healthy habits through this transition.”

Dr. Rhodes and his colleagues have been surprised by the positive response they’ve received thanks, in part, to local media coverage. “New parents have taken a real interest in this study, which is good, since it shows that they are taking positive steps to protect their health.”

Ultimately, Dr. Rhodes and his colleagues have plans to incorporate the results of their 18-month study, which began in early 2007, into prenatal education. The team’s aim is to educate new parents before the birth of their first child on the challenges of maintaining healthy personal habits.

“My collaborators and I are very grateful and appreciative of the opportunity to conduct our research with the support of the Canadian Diabetes Association,” Dr. Rhodes says. “We believe the results will provide very useful information in our understanding of weight gain during the key life transition into parenthood.”

Dr. Rhodes’ spare time is taken up with his two children ... and his golden retriever. He is also an avid cook and movie buff. “I’m like everyone else,” Dr. Rhodes explains. “I love and cherish my sedentary lifestyle, but it’s great to have balance, dogs that need walking and a regular routine that keeps me from becoming fully sedentary.” **DD**