

Pacific Islander population in Utah is the focus of a week of health promotions

By [Wendy Leonard](#), Deseret News

Link: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865615138/Pacific-Islander-population-in-Utah-is-the-focus-of-a-week-of-health-promotions.html>

Sunday, Nov. 9 2014 3:11 p.m. MST

SALT LAKE CITY — At 469 pounds, Lemz Asi believed his future health depended on landing a spot on "The Biggest Loser."

"I couldn't really see myself doing it by myself," said Asi, of Midvale. "(The TV show) was going to be my only chance to get the mental and physical help I needed to lose weight. I didn't have the mentality to stay focused on my own."



But instead of impending stardom, the 6-foot-6-inch Samoan man put his dusty gym membership to use — and while the treadmill and elliptical machines were just "too slow" for him, an attempt at Zumba really hit home.

"I'd been dancing all my life. I figured I could do that," he said.

And dance he did — to the tune of losing more than 170 pounds, something he never thought was possible.

More than 52 percent of the native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander population in Utah is obese, compared with 24.8 percent of whites and 25.6 percent of black Utahns, according to the Utah Department of Health.

Pacific Islanders in Utah are also among the highest prevalence of arthritis (27.9 percent), diabetes (16.1 percent) and other health conditions. Infant mortality is also a struggle for the minority population, as maternal weight influences the health of babies.

In response to the high rates, the Utah Department of Health's [Office of Health Disparities](#) is kicking off [a week of health promotion events](#) aiming to encourage the Utah Pacific Islander population to make healthy choices.

Many of the events, held at locations from Salt Lake City to St. George, intend to "expose folks to different forms of exercise than they might be used to," said Jake Fitisemanu, an outreach coordinator for the office. He said people know they need to be healthier but might not know how to get there.

More details on Utah Pacific Islander Week can be found online at utahpacifichealth.org.

"The food folks are accustomed to eating and the much more sedentary lifestyle now is different from the active lifestyle of our ancestors in the islands," Fitisemanu said, adding that the epidemic of chronic disease among Pacific Islanders is a historically new phenomenon.

"Before the arrival of colonizers, we didn't have beef, there was no fried foods, 80 percent of the diet was plant-based, and they ate mostly fresh seafood," he said. "In order to survive in those outlying islands, life involved lots of paddling, climbing trees and dependence on growing your own food, working the gardens and being active."

Today's sedentary workplaces and an increasing reliance on heavily processed foods, Fitisemanu said, has produced "a level of sedentarism that we've never experienced before."

Asi said he's had to withstand a lot of the foods served at family and community functions, as he knows eating it won't make him feel healthy.

"A lot of the people in the Polynesian community rationalize it because of the culture," he said. "Growing up, it was so normal. I was raised my whole life being big, and I was comfortable with it."

Asi has reached out to friends and family members, offering to become a gym buddy to them. He continues to work out at least two hours every day, six days a week. Shifting his mindset about losing weight and being fit has been difficult, but it has come along with perseverance.

"I know how these really big people feel," Asi said. "I know how they feel, and I know how I feel now after losing weight. And I want to help them."

The road to fitness hasn't been easy, he said, adding that the past almost two years have been full of speed bumps and disappointments, but also accomplishments.

"I've fallen so many times. I just make sure I tell myself that I cannot go back to that life," Asi said.

Choosing a more healthful life, he said, has also helped him quit drinking alcohol and become more social and helpful to people around him.

"I'm more confident with myself in doing what is right and being a positive role model for people," Asi said.

The health department has begun collecting success stories such as Asi's from local Pacific Islanders, hoping to change the dialogue from a previous focus on negative impacts and obituaries caused by poor health choices.

"Let's not dwell on the negatives, but let's acknowledge them and find ways to improve our health, individually and in our families, and move forward," Fitisemanu said. "Small changes can make a big difference."

Utah Pacific Islander Health Week kicks off Monday at the Sorenson Multicultural Center, 855 W. 1300 South, from 6 to 8:30 p.m.

Email: wleonard@deseretnews.com, Twitter: wendyleonards