

Center focuses on healthy eating

ARUN ARJUNAN
The Battalion

Scientists at Texas A&M's Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center (VFIC) present their research on nutrition to many professional critics in the industry. However, their most impressionable audience is probably elementary school students. Scientists from various departments at A&M and support staff in the VFIC developed the VICKids Program in 1998 to teach children in kindergarten through high school about research in food crop development and nutrition.

The program uses a series of interactive presentations, demonstrations, games and lab tours.

Jima Jordan, one of the undergraduate staffers in the program and a junior agricultural development major, said the main focus is to get students to understand how to live a healthy lifestyle.

"We start out with a general discussion on the importance of eating healthy and then we get the kids active showing them why they need fruits and vegetables to function," she said.

Following the introduction, the students participate in games that show the nutritional differences between

snack foods, such as candy and chips, and fruits and vegetables.

Older children are treated to a tour of VFIC's labs, where they can see some of the latest innovations in plant biotechnology.

Melissa Reeves, marketing coordinator for the VFIC, said the lab tour also provides a forum for understanding how science works in fruits and vegetables.

"Kids can see the beneficial effects of plant chemicals such as lycopene in tomatoes and carrots as they learn about the science of fruit and vegetables," Reeves said.

Lycopene helps strengthen collagen proteins in the body. Collagen proteins are made of inelastic fibers and are the main constituent of bones, tendons, cartilage, connective tissue, and the skin. Lycopene is also

known to help prevent lung and prostate cancer.

Reeves said the outreach program has a lasting influence on the way the students view nutrition, and ultimately, on agricultural economics.

"The children take home an important lesson about eating nutritiously, and they help influence their families eating habits, which increases consumer activity with fruits and vegetables," Reeves said.

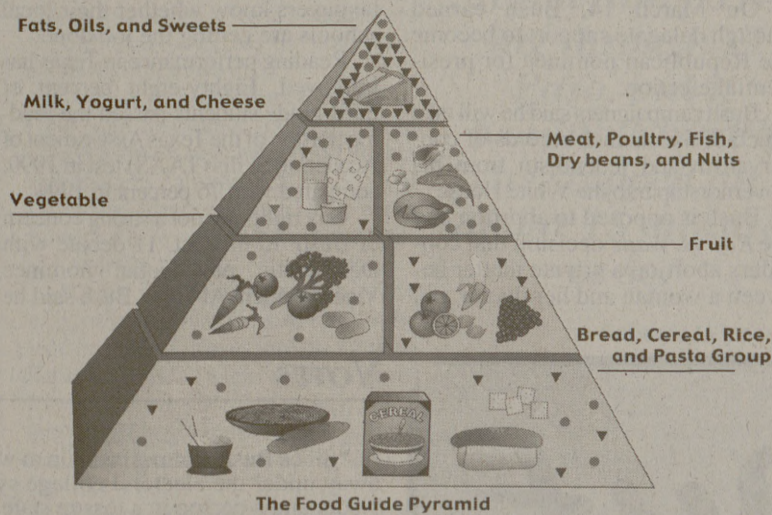
The VFIC plans to expand this program across Texas with video-conferencing equipment.

Any site on the Trans Texas Video Network (TTVN) can access the broadcast from College Station.

Leonard Pike, professor of horticulture, said the staff at VFIC feels that this expansion will increase awareness of vegetable and fruit nutrition among children throughout the state.

"Typically, kids do not eat a lot of fruits and vegetables," Pike said. "We have found that telling them about nutrition in a fun, interactive program gets them excited about eating more fruits and vegetables."

Reeves said the program has witnessed tremendous growth since it began by educating more than 800 children about the importance of fruits and vegetables.



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Disease-causing parasite affecting immigrants

HOUSTON (AP) — Up to half of Hispanic immigrants who are admitted to Houston hospitals for seizures have a brain-burrowing parasite that is passed on by people infected with pork tapeworms, a tropical researcher said.

The parasite, which is difficult to treat and potentially fatal, is diagnosed in 20 to 30 immigrants from Mexico and Central America each year at Taub General Hospital, officials told the Houston Chronicle in Wednesday's editions.

Dr. Clinton White, a Baylor College of Medicine infectious disease professor, said 20 to 30 more cases appear each year at other Houston-area hospitals. Nationally, 1,000 to 2,000 new cases of the condition, called neurocysticercosis, are

reported annually.

"This is not an uncommon disease," said White, who addressed the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene annual meeting this week.

The condition appears to be caused by a combination of eating undercooked pork and poor hygiene.

It occurs after a person ingests water or food, contaminated by human feces, that contain tapeworm eggs. The feces acquire the tapeworm when a person eats undercooked pork and becomes host to a pork tapeworm, which sheds eggs in the intestine.

Inadequate hand washing can spread the eggs to food or water, which can infect another person,

doctors said. The ingested eggs pass through the blood and form a cyst, most often in the brain.

Symptoms of infection include seizures, vomiting, dizziness, psychosis, stroke and blurred vision.

Treatment can involve anti-seizure medication, parasite-killing drugs and steroids to suppress brain swelling or surgery.

Nearly all cases in Houston have been in Hispanic immigrants, or in U.S.-born individuals who spend large amounts of time in Mexico or Central America, White said. But he cites one documented case of neurocysticercosis in U.S.-born people who have never eaten pork or gone to Latin-America.

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