

Women's health fair looks for results



Patti Singer, Staff writer

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(Photo: Provided)

It's one thing to know your blood pressure.

It's another to know what to do to get and keep it in a normal range.

It's a third to actually do it.

Dr. James Woods is trying to get people to turn knowledge into action, but he needs their help.

The founder of the Women's Health Screening Fair at the Market wants to know what participants did with the information they received at the sixth annual event, which runs from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday at the Rochester Public Market.

As participants leave the big tent after learning their risk for conditions such as diabetes, colon cancer, osteoporosis or other physical and emotional conditions, Woods' volunteers will ask for contact information so

they can follow up in a few weeks.

"That's so critical," said Woods. "This whole issue of trying to provide information, whether it's by brochures or whether it's personal, it doesn't go anywhere if they don't do anything with it."

The Women's Health Screening Fair, hosted by the city of Rochester and UR Medicine, provides information about healthy living and health insurance. But it focuses on actual screening tests for women 18 and older to determine their risk of illness.

It is one of numerous health fairs — large and small — in the community throughout the year. Yet few, if any, organizers go back and ask whether participants have gone to see a health professional or incorporated more healthy habits based on what they learned.

"It's the old 'You can bring the horse to water but you can't make him drink,' " said Woods, former chairman of the University of Rochester Medical Center Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

Each of the previous years, Woods has wanted to use the Women's Health Screening Fair to test the hypothesis that attending health fairs leads to better health. Then the Greater Rochester Health Foundation, one of the sponsors, made evaluation a condition of its funding.

"Right now, we don't know if health fairs make a difference or not," said Bonnie DeVinney, vice president and chief program officer of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. "It feels good. It's a wonderful thing to do. But does it make a difference?"

DeVinney said finding the answers is important when so many people are concerned about the high cost of health care — either from a community standpoint or because individuals find themselves paying deductibles or higher copayments.

Health fairs attract people already attuned to their health, so the assumption might be that they lead to change. If so, to what degree? How much are people willing to do?

"I don't say this to criticize," Woods said. "People's lives are complicated, they're busy. Some are struggling with kids, relationships, homes. Health care may be fairly low on their list of day-to-day challenges. Those are the people I'd like to reach out and hug. I can spend a year getting ready for this and worry about the details. In their lives, this may not be the most important thing."

Woods said the screening event tries to strike a balance between providing or doing for people, and getting them to take responsibility.

"We're coming out to them, where they are," he said. "But in making that happen, we're asking them to take responsibility for their own health. If something comes up, that's important to follow through."

Woods has collected some data in each of the previous five years. From 2009 to 2012, the rate of participants who were overweight or obese ranged from 52 percent to 57 percent. Last year, 72 percent of participants were overweight or obese.

The rate of people with elevated blood pressure at the time of the screening ranged from 19 percent to 43 percent. Last year, 27 percent of people were found to have elevated blood pressure.

At the same time, well more than 80 percent of participants had health insurance and those with a primary care doctor ranged from 78 percent to 92 percent.

If Woods finds that people at risk for illness aren't following up with their doctor or otherwise attending to their health, that won't necessarily mean health fairs don't work.

"If people aren't making the effort, the next question to ask is why. The answers could lie in changing how information is presented or figuring out the point where knowledge becomes inaction.

"I don't ever see this as the end of anything," Woods said. "Instead of looking at it as a negative, I look at it as an optimist."

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If you go

What: Sixth annual Women's Health Screening Fair at the Market.

When: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday.

Where: Rochester Public Market, 280 N. Union St.

Cost: Free.

For more information: Call (585) 428-5990.

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