

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## Helping obese youth shed pounds Wellspring weight loss camp opens in Squamish, the first Canadian location for organization

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A weight-loss camp that has helped many obese and overweight youth shed pounds in two countries is opening its first Canadian facility in Squamish this spring.

The organization, called Wellspring, has opened 14 camps in the U.S. and the United Kingdom since 2004. Its arrival in British Columbia is welcome news, says an obesity expert in Victoria.

“The reality is that childhood obesity is really hard to fight,” says Dr. Michael Lyon, medical director at the Canadian Centre for Functional Medicine. “These camps are typically one of the better approaches. No doubt about it.”

According to the Childhood Obesity Foundation, a Canadian charitable organization, childhood obesity in Canada has nearly tripled in the last 25 years. Approximately 26 per cent of Canadian children aged two to 17 years old are overweight or obese.

While there are several weight-loss camps for adults in this province, this is the first camp for youth here and just the second in Canada.

Based on experience at Wellspring’s other sites, campers can expect to lose an average of four pounds per week.

Camp director Ondrej Jurik says Squamish was selected because they wanted something in the Pacific Northwest and the currency exchange rate makes a Canadian camp cheaper for Americans and Canadians. It will accept 30 campers and is expected to fill quickly.

Youth between 11 and 18 who are at least 20 pounds overweight can register for either four- or eight-week sessions.

Daniel Kirschenbaum, the clinical director of Wellspring and the chief architect of the Wellspring approach, has studied weight loss for 35 years.

A psychologist, he distances his camps from so-called “fat camps,” which he says simply limit the calorie intake of participants.

Wellspring also limits calories, but Kirschenbaum claims it offers a more scientific approach that uses psychology, activity and a low-fat diet.

“It’s not like people can’t possibly lose weight on other diets,” he says. “It’s just that this works better. It is more comfortable, it’s simpler. We focus on minimizing intake of fat so even an 11-year-old can look at a bag of potato chips and see one that has low fat and one with 10 grams and make a decision.”

By emphasizing fat reduction over calories, Kirschenbaum says the campers don’t leave the table hungry.

“We try to prevent a feeling of deprivation,” he says. “If they feel hungry and deprived, it’s not going to last. Our approach is designed to increase satiety, increase satisfaction with kid-friendly foods.”

They serve foods such as bison burgers, pizza with fat-free cheese and baked french fries, and also provide limitless amounts of fat-free foods such as yogurt, fresh fruit and veggies, and fat-free egg salad.

At the four- or eight-week camps, each camper is given a pedometer and urged to take 10,000 steps a day. Each morning, they walk five kilometres before breakfast. In Squamish, they will also kayak, hike and river raft, and play team sports such as basketball, soccer and field hockey.

“If you just diet and don’t increase activity, your body actually becomes metabolically more efficient,” he says.

The third tier of Wellspring’s approach is to use cognitive behaviour therapy to help youngsters change behaviours and develop what Kirschenbaum calls a healthy obsession.

“What is important is to not have a million ways to talk yourself into deviating from the plan. The notion of healthy obsession is that that is not okay. You really have to be firm about what the boundaries are.”

Each camp is staffed with registered cognitive behaviour therapists who work one on one and in groups to teach campers how to deal with emotion and stress so that they don’t fall back on bingeing.

Nora Fischer was 12 years old and 261 pounds when she left her home in Nashville, Tenn., last summer for a Wellspring camp in Texas.

In her first week, she lost 9.5 pounds, the most she ever lost in one week. Her rate of loss has since levelled off, but by the end of eight weeks, she had shed 34 pounds and wanted to lose more.

She enrolled in a residential school run by Wellspring in August and is proud to say she is down to 191.2 pounds. That's 70 pounds in nine months, an average of two pounds per week. She is satisfied with that.

"If I were to lose weight any faster, it wouldn't be as healthy and I might put it on faster," she says with her newfound wisdom.

Camp wasn't easy at first for her. "I was struggling with just everyday things that you should be able to do. Like having to heave myself out of bed," she said in an interview from California.

Nora used to spend most of her time sitting on the couch, and eating or knitting while watching TV. She was a wrestler, but hated other sports because she couldn't keep up.

The camps gave her a chance to play more sports with other obese and overweight kids and she has come to really enjoy soccer and field hockey.

She has also learned about nutrition and how to modify her favourite recipes.

"It has changed my life so much. I am definitely starting to feel more comfortable in my own skin. I am a lot more confident. I don't feel like I need to be a wallflower."

The Squamish camp is at the new campus of Quest University. The first camp starts July 5. It costs \$6,190 for four weeks and \$9,190 for eight weeks. To register, call toll-free: 1-866-364-0808 or apply online at [www.wellspringvancouver.com](http://www.wellspringvancouver.com)

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