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Parks and Rec Leprechaun Challenge walk/run scheduled for March 16

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times Friday marked the beginning of the month of March, and the start of spring is less than three weeks away.

With the warmer weather the season brings, it's the perfect time to get outside and enjoy Mother Nature.

While everyone can take a walk in the park any day, Seward County's K-State Research and Extension office is encouraging the habit even more, and starting St. Patrick's Day, walkers can take part in the Extension's fitness challenge, Walk Kansas, which promotes a healthier, more active lifestyle.

Walk Kansas is a team-based program that will help people make better nutrition choices and learn positive ways to deal with stress.

Seward County's event officially kicks off on March 17, but Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Agent Kathy Bloom said participants can start earlier than that.

"We're going to start March 16 at the Leprechaun Challenge that Parks and Rec hosts every year," she said. "That is a walk/run."

Bloom said Extension officials will be on hand to give out water bottles and sign people up for Walk Kansas during that challenge, and time spent in the Parks and Rec event can be used toward Walk Kansas.

"We're excited to get it kicked off, and I think everyone's ready to get out there and get a little fat burned off that we've all stored through the winter," she said.

In Walk Kansas, participants can form teams of six people and challenge their co-workers,

family members, friends and neighbors to see who can walk the most miles during the eight weeks of the program.

Bloom said walkers can likewise go to the Seward County Extension's Web site at www.seward.ksu.edu or the office at 810 Stadium Road in Liberal to apply for Walk Kansas.

When applying, participants will receive a packet of information and paperwork for all members of their team.

"There's all kinds of great information on the Walk Kansas Web site, which is linked at our site as well," Bloom added.

None of the application forms are available on the Walk Kansas page, however. Last year, students from Liberal High School participated through the LHS Around the World challenge. Bloom said the school is doing a different type of program this year, but youth are still encouraged to sign up for Walk Kansas.

"It's all the same thing," she said. "It was just a little too much for the school nurse to keep up with last year, so we are sure encouraging anyone who enjoyed it last year through that venue to come on over."

Bloom said there are three different challenges with Walk Kansas, and it is up to each team to choose.

"One is walking across the state of Kansas over the eight-week period, which is equivalent to 423 miles," she said. "If you want a more vigorous challenge, you can walk collectively as a team across the state of Kansas and back, which is 846 miles. If you're just a real overachiever or just really like to work out and do lots of activity, you can walk the 1,200 miles as a team around the perimeter of Kansas."

Bloom said participants can also log minutes of physical activity and keep track of how many fruits and vegetable they eat each week.

"It's shocking when you document how much you eat," she said. "Sometimes, it's pretty shocking how little you eat. We all need at least three to five fruits and vegetables a day."

Bloom said walkers are also encouraged to get up and move around every hour, which she said is good for both mental and physical health.

"You earn 15 bonus minutes per week if you do that at least six days per week," she said. "You don't have to be any kind of marathon runner. Any kind of moderate physical activity that you do can count – yard work or walking up and down stairs."

Bloom said new research suggests prolonged sitting may be a health risk for many types of chronic diseases.

"If you sit more than an hour at a time at work, home or while driving or traveling, take a one to two-minute break every hour," she said.

Walk Kansas participants can also sign up to receive a weekly e-mail newsletter.

"In that newsletter are tips for being more active and nutrition advice and stress management tips and recipe and how to live on a budget," Bloom said. "That will be e-mailed to you, and if people request, we can send a hard copy to them."

The eight-week program wraps up on May 11, and all teams that achieve their walking goals will have their names thrown in a hat for a chance to win some exercise equipment.

"We don't know exactly what that will be at this time," Bloom said. "It depends on how much funds we get."

The Extension agent added some mini-grants have been requested for Walk Kansas, and a portion of the money collected from a \$10 entry fee will go toward prizes for the event.

"Some goes to the state to promote the program," Bloom said. "Some will stay in the county, and some of that money can go towards the prizes we can get. After we get kicked off in another week or two, we'll have an idea."

T-shirts area also available for Walk Kansas for \$8 for sizes small to extra large and \$10 for larger sizes.

"We have three different colors, and we have samples here in our office if they'd like to see," she said.

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