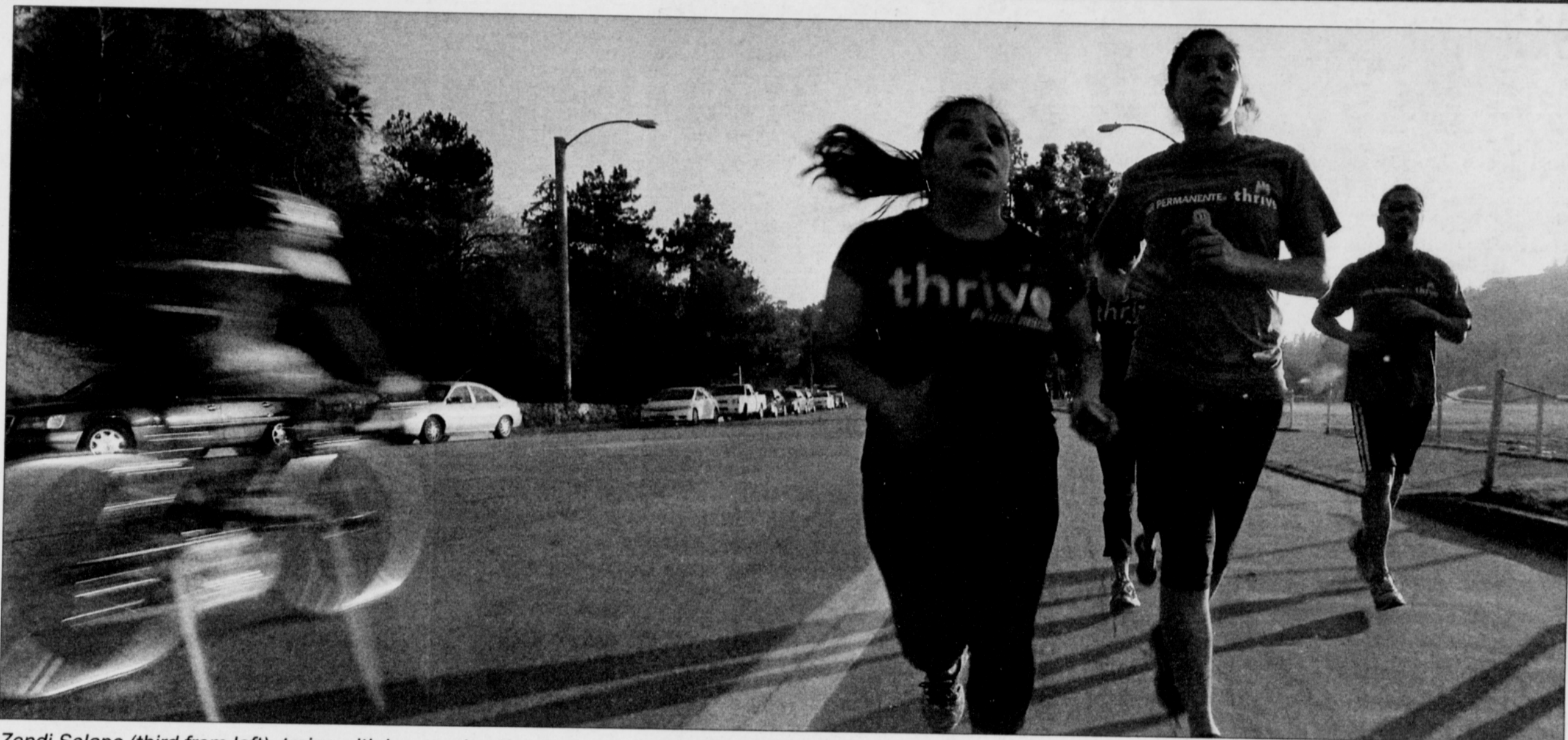


# HEALTH



Zendi Solano (third from left), trains with her running club in Pasadena, Calif. Kaiser Permanente made a big push a few years ago to get its California doctors to ask patients about exercise. Since then, Kaiser has expanded the program to several other states. (AP Photo)

## Time for a Check-up on Exercise

### Doctors ask patients about their physical activity

(AP) — Roll up a sleeve for the blood pressure cuff. Stick out a wrist for the pulse-taking. Lift your tongue for the thermometer. Report how many minutes you are active or getting exercise.

Wait, what?

If the last item isn't part of the usual drill at your doctor's office, a movement is afoot to change that. One recent national survey indicated only a third of Americans said their doctors asked about or prescribed physical activity.

Kaiser Permanente, one of the nation's largest nonprofit health insurance plans, made a big push a few years ago to get its southern California doctors to ask patients about exercise. Since then, Kaiser has expanded the program to several other states.

Here's how it works: During any routine check of vital signs, a nurse or medical assistant asks how many days a week the patient exercises and for how long. The number of minutes per week is posted along with other vitals at the top the medical chart. So it's among the first things the doctor sees.

"All we ask our physicians to do is to make a comment on it, like, 'Hey, good job,' or 'I noticed today that your blood pressure is too high and you're not doing any exercise.

There's a connection there. We really need to start you walking 30 minutes a day,'" said Dr. Robert Sallis, a Kaiser family doctor. He hatched the vital sign idea as part of a larger initiative by doctors groups.

He said Kaiser doctors generally prescribe exercise first, instead of medication, and for many patients who follow through that's often all it takes.

It's a challenge to make progress. A study looking at the first year of Kaiser's effort showed more than a third of patients said they never exercise.

Sallis said some patients may not be aware that research shows physical inactivity is riskier than high blood pressure, obesity and other health risks people know they should avoid. As recently as November a government-led study concluded that people who routinely exercise live longer than others, even if they're overweight.

Kaiser began the program about three years ago after 2008 government guidelines recommended at least 2 1/2 hours of moderately vigorous exercise each week. That includes brisk walking, cycling, lawn-mowing — anything that gets you breathing a little harder than normal for at least 10 minutes at a time.

A recently published study of

nearly 2 million people in Kaiser's southern California network found that less than a third met physical activity guidelines. That's worse than results from national studies. But promoters of the vital signs effort think Kaiser's numbers are

more realistic because people are more likely to tell their own doctors the truth.

Dr. William Dietz, an obesity expert who retired last year from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said measuring a patient's

exercise regardless of method is essential, but that "naming it as a vital sign kind of elevates it."

Figuring out how to get people to be more active is the important next step, he said, and could have a big effect in reducing medical costs.

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