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Preventing the 'Freshman 15' via the Web

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A new study published in the July/August 2013 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* evaluated the motivational effects of Project WebHealth, a web-based health promotion intervention developed to prevent excessive weight gain in college students. Researchers found that specific procedures and components of Project WebHealth successfully motivated students to improve their weight-related health behaviors and that the level of motivation differed by gender.

The college years are frequently associated with risky health behaviors such as poor diet quality, reduced physical activity, and inadequate weight loss practices, often resulting in the "Freshman 15." Studies have suggested that web-based health promotional programs could make a difference. Project WebHealth online lessons are designed to help motivate students to engage in more healthful behaviors like increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and levels of maintained physical activity. This nondiet approach included lessons about body size and healthy weight, hunger/fullness, physical activity, skills to fuel the body, enhancing food variety, and eating enjoyment.

A multi-institutional study team investigated the overall impact of Project WebHealth and evaluated the underlying procedures that could help change dietary and exercise behavior among college students, including physical assessments and monetary incentives, as well as intervention components (eg, online lessons, goal setting). The study included 653 Project WebHealth participants from 8 geographically diverse institutions across the United States.

About half of the participants completed the Project WebHealth online lessons and filled out an instructional materials motivation survey, which gathered feedback about the lessons and lesson components. All participants completed an additional survey which gathered feedback on the participation process, including the online study surveys and physical assessments, feedback about the assessments, interaction with the research staff, and compensation.

The study found that women were generally more motivated than men. Among those who improved their health behaviors, the most effective lessons/lesson components for men included those on fueling the body, goal setting, and research snippets. Their female counterparts found significantly more motivation from lessons on body size and eating enjoyment, and by the suggested weekly activities.

Lead investigator Colleen Dour, MS, RD, Department of Public Health, Food Studies and Nutrition, Syracuse University, explains, "These findings suggest implementing a nondiet approach could be effective in gender-tailored interventions, but content relative to nondiet themes might need modification to improve its motivational influence. Such improvements might include adding video or audio clips within the lessons or even sending a tailored email to participants with a health message. Because many young adults still focus on dieting, further exploration on how best to communicate a nondiet approach is needed. Rather than college students falling into inappropriate diet habits that are common during the college years, we want to teach them how to prevent these behaviors from developing."

More information: "Process Evaluation of Project WebHealth: A Nondieting Web-based Intervention for Obesity Prevention in College Students," by Colleen A. Dour, MS, RD; Tanya M. Horacek, PhD, RD; Susan M. Schembre, PhD, RD; Barbara Lohse, PhD, RD; Sharon Hoerr, PhD, RD; Kendra Kattelmann, PhD, RD; Adrienne A. White, PhD, RD;

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Suzanne Shoff, PhD; Beatrice Phillips, PhD, RD; and Geoffrey Greene, PhD, RD, appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 45, Issue 4 (July/August 2013)

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