

Healthy relationships help foster healthy eating habits

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Amy Gorin, associate professor of psychology and obesity researcher, at the produce section in a local grocery store. Credit: Peter Morenus/UConn Photo

There are few subjects more personal than an individual's weight. And for those people who are considered overweight, whether this is a scientifically accurate measurement or a personal assessment, the battle to control unwanted pounds can seem like a lonely fight.

But Amy Gorin, associate professor of psychology and principal investigator at UConn's Center for Health Intervention and Prevention (CHIP), says it doesn't have to be this way, nor should it.

Gorin is a behavioral clinical psychologist, and the basic premise of her work is that most people know what they are supposed to be doing – eating healthy foods and exercising more – but the difficulty is in implementing those behaviors and then maintaining them over time.

Gorin explains that traditional weight loss programs tend to focus on the individual, and the assumption is that if people fail to reach or maintain their goals, it's mainly due to a lack of willpower. But her research suggests otherwise.

"With obesity, the message is complex," she says. "It's not like smoking where the data clearly demonstrates that tobacco is bad for your health and the message is a simple 'Don't do it.'"

"On the contrary, we all need food in order to survive, so it's a matter of sifting through all the conflicting information about what to eat and what not to eat, and how much of what type of exercise is good for you, and how to achieve your goals. But people don't live in a vacuum, and establishing [good eating habits](#) and maintaining a healthy weight is difficult to do alone. In a real sense, we're all in this together, and the support of family and friends is a key element to anyone's success in leading a healthy lifestyle."

With her long-standing interest in the role that personal relationships play in [weight control](#), it is not surprising that Gorin has found a colleague with similar interests. She has been working in collaboration with Michelle Cloutier, a pediatric pulmonary specialist and professor of pediatrics at UConn Health. Together they have established several initiatives that approach [healthy eating](#) as an integral part of a family's

lifestyle.

The two met after Cloutier had developed a module for primary care physicians to use with young asthma patients, and was to come up with something similar for them to use in explaining the risks of childhood obesity to parents. Gorin had just joined CHIP, and they found they had similar views about family and community involvement.

Since then, their collaboration has included the [Nurturing Families Network](#) (NFN), a no-cost, voluntary program run through UConn Health that provides information and guidance to first-time parents through community agencies and hospitals throughout Connecticut. With significant input from the network's home visitors, Gorin and Cloutier have developed an obesity prevention curriculum for the critical prenatal to first birthday period that assists mothers in making healthy eating and activity choices for themselves and their new babies. This National Institutes of Health-funded study is one of the first to focus on obesity prevention at such a young age.

Another collaboration is an [obesity prevention](#) program developed by Gorin and Cloutier, Steps to Growing Up Healthy, which seeks to help [primary care physicians](#) incorporate evidence-based strategies such as motivational interviewing and dietary goal setting into routine care of children between two and four years of age. The program is particularly focused on reaching high-risk children, especially African American and Latino cohorts who are disproportionately affected by [obesity](#) and related health conditions. The program includes follow-up by community health care workers who visit the children in their homes.

Gorin says that although it's now understood that a commitment to good nutrition and healthy eating should begin in infancy, it is never too late to begin eating a healthy diet and watching one's weight.

"Weight control at any age sometimes seems like an uphill battle, but even a 5 to 10 percent weight loss can cut a person's risk of developing diabetes in half," she says. "My work focuses on supporting people as they try to reach their goals, even if it is one pound at a time."

Provided by University of Connecticut

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