

## TORC at UH turns to virtual world of Second Life for new study

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The University of Houston department of health and human performance is launching an international effort to recruit 500 participants for a study promoting healthy dietary habits and physical activity. The study will take place entirely in the virtual world of Second Life (SL).

The project is part of the UH Texas Obesity Research Center's (TORC) International Health Challenge, and offers an enjoyable way for participants to learn about preventing and treating obesity through education, skills training and outreach.

"This is an excellent opportunity to learn and practice these new behaviors in a virtual environment and in real life," said Rebecca Lee, associate professor and director of TORC. "It's also a great place to meet other avatars and share information and experiences."

The TORC International Health Challenge in Second Life will provide opportunities for avatars to earn Lindens—the currency of Second Life—for walking on treadmills, riding bikes and trying new fruits and vegetables in Second Life. Participants compete to earn "Challenge Points" for their healthy behaviors. The country team that earns the most Challenge Points will win the International Health Challenge. Materials will be available in English, French and Spanish.

TORC was an awardee of the University of Southern California-Annenberg School for Communication's Network Culture Project:

Second Life and the Public Good Community Challenge. TORC will develop space in Second Life, create games and interactive learning opportunities and reward avatars when they join the International Health Challenge and participate in health behaviors in Second Life.

"We hope to develop multi-national collaborations in SL to increase awareness, knowledge, skills and support for healthy living," Lee said. "Reducing obesity is an international priority, and SL provides a portal to an international community." Lee has conducted extensive research on the subject of obesity, in particular the neighborhood factors that may lead to obesity, such as availability and quality of fresh produce, and the quality and quantity of physical activity resources available in neighborhoods.

Participants must be members of Second Life and can visit [slurl.com/secondlife/HHP%20at%20UH/128/128/0](http://slurl.com/secondlife/HHP%20at%20UH/128/128/0) to sign up.

Source: University of Houston

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