

Computer fun helps improve girls' food choices, fitness

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The Food, Fun and Fitness Internet Program for Girls uses culturally sensitive comic strips geared towards 8- to 10-year-old African-American girls to promote better food choices and physical activity. Credit: Photo by Stephen Ausmus.

Lively, educational comic strips, geared to 8- to 10-year-old African-American girls, can help these young viewers make better food choices and improve their physical fitness. That's what happened in a preliminary study, reported several years ago, with 78 Internet-savvy African American girls age 8 to 10. Now, the program's creators hope to repeat the study in a larger test with 400 young volunteers and their parents. The scientists also want to develop a version targeted to Hispanic girls.

Behavioral science researcher and assistant professor of pediatrics Deborah Thompson and a team of colleagues created the comic strips-

based "Food, Fun, and Fitness Internet Program for Girls." Thompson and some of her co-investigators, including Tom Baranowski, Karen Cullen, and others, are at the ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas.

For a preliminary, 8-week study, volunteers logged onto the "Food, Fun, and Fitness" website from their home computers, then watched the unfolding drama of six appealing comic-strip characters--young [girls](#) very much like themselves. The cartoon personalities struggle with meeting the same food and fitness goals as the volunteers, namely, to eat at least five servings a day of fruit, veggies, and/or 100-percent fruit juice; drink at least five glasses of water; and devote more time to [physical activity](#). After watching the comics, volunteers set diet and physical activity goals and reported their success from the previous week. Volunteers were paid for their participation.

Results of this investigation showed relatively high log-on rates to the website, low drop-out rates, and statistically significant increases in consumption of fruit, vegetables and 100-percent fruit juice, and in time spent in healthful physical activity, according to Thompson.

Healthy food and [fitness](#) habits are key to preventing overweight and obesity. Childhood overweight and obesity can lead to onset of life-threatening illnesses, including certain kinds of cancer.

Thompson and her colleagues documented results of the study in the journals *Health Education Research* in 2007 and *Preventive Medicine* in 2008. The larger study that the team is now planning will evaluate the longer-term effects of the program.

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