

Researchers find nonprofit weight loss program beats obesity

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In the battle against obesity, new research has found that it may not be necessary to spend a lot on a weight loss program when cheaper, nonprofit alternatives may work just as well.

Researchers at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus found those who spent three years in the nonprofit Take Off Pounds Sensibly (TOPS) program lost five to seven percent of their body weight and kept it off.

"This is the first time a study of this size and duration has ever been done on a weight loss program," said Nia Mitchell, MD, MPH, and a [primary care](#) physician who worked on the study. "The natural history of weight loss is weight regain and we were happy to see that people were able to keep off the weight."

The three-year study, published last month in the research journal, *Obesity*, followed thousands of people enrolled in TOPS. The program provided access to their database, but no funding for the research. Milwaukee-based TOPS helps members lose weight through group support and education. They are encouraged to get a weight goal from their doctors and make it their target. At the same time, they attend weekly meetings and weigh-ins. Members receive a booklet with a six week lesson plan, a one-year subscription to TOPS News and membership in the local chapter.

The study points out the large price difference between TOPS and other

well-known weight loss programs. TOPS costs about \$90 a year while [Weight Watchers](#) is between \$480 and \$625 annually. Programs like Nutrisystem and Jenny Craig, which include the price of food, can cost between \$3,600 and \$6,500 a year.

Mitchell said there have been studies of popular commercial weight loss programs but little investigation of nonprofits like TOPS or Overeaters Anonymous. A 1974 study concluded that [behavior modification](#) resulted in greater weight loss than other methods. TOPS incorporated the technique into its program along with group support, exercise, and monitoring [food intake](#). It also uses volunteers to run meetings rather than paid staff.

"Peer mentoring has been shown to encourage behavioral change in other areas and appears to be effective when it comes to weight loss," Mitchell said.

During the study, 42,481 people renewed their TOPS membership at least once including 2,427 with nonconsecutive renewals. Those who renewed each year lost the most weight and kept it off for up to three years. Those who didn't renew every year, lost less. The research shows that the weight lost by those who remained in TOPS is similar to the [weight loss](#) seen in a previous study of individuals who completed one year of Weight Watchers.

The lesson in all of this, says Mitchell, is that the TOPS results are comparable to more expensive commercial programs. She said future studies should look more closely into the use of nonprofits to reach populations most at risk for [obesity](#).

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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