

Family support motivates Mexican-Americans to adopt healthy habits

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Encouragement from family members helps motivate Mexican-American adults to eat more fruits and vegetables and to engage in regular exercise, according to a new study in the current issue of *American Journal of Health Promotion*. However, about 40 percent of study participants reported receiving no encouragement at all from their social networks for adopting healthy habits.

Many Mexican-Americans share a cultural belief that emphasizes the importance of family, state the study authors, led by Sato Ashida, Ph.D., of the School of Public [Health](#) at the University of Memphis. “Influence from network members provides a potentially culturally appropriate strategy to motivate individual behavior change in this population,” they noted. The prevalence of obesity is higher among Mexican-Americans

than among non-Hispanic whites and identifying methods for reducing health disparities remains a priority for public health officials.

The new research is based on 161 multi-generational families, from which at least three adults reported individual demographic information and health history. Each adult then received a personalized mailing containing their family health history; risk assessments for heart disease, diabetes, and cancer; and behavioral recommendations. The researchers recruited participants from an ongoing population-based study in Houston.

Subsequent telephone interviews assessed participants' current diet and [exercise](#) habits, motivation to improve nutrition and physical fitness, and social networks. Findings showed that having at least one supportive friend or family member was associated with having motivation to improve relevant behaviors. Children — whether adolescent or adult — were the most frequently mentioned "encouragers," followed by spouses, mothers and siblings.

The new report is the first to document [encouragement](#) within households as an important influence on health behaviors, according to Thomas Valente, Ph.D., an expert on social networks at the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California. "We know the networks are there, but we haven't measured the kinds of communications or actions that have implications for behavior."

The study authors note that the data indicate neither the strength of an individual's motivation nor a timeframe for intended behavior change. They also caution that their findings may not apply to people with different social and cultural backgrounds. They conclude that new public health interventions could focus on identifying "encouragers" within individuals' social networks and eliciting their supportive interactions.

“There are many people who don’t have the networks they need to achieve health goals,” adds Valente. “We could create interventions to help people evaluate their networks for positive and negative influences.”

More information: Ashida, S., Wilkinson, A.V., Koehlv, L.M. (2011). Social Influence and Motivation to Change Health Behaviors Among Mexican-Origin Adults: Implications for Diet and Physical Activity. *American Journal of Health Promotion*. [doi: 10.4278/ajhp.100107-QUAN-2](https://doi.org/10.4278/ajhp.100107-QUAN-2)

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