

Social media may help fight childhood obesity

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Social media may be an effective tool to help children overcome obesity, according to a new American Heart Association scientific statement.

The statement is published online in the association's journal *Circulation*.

"Online communication and social media are an increasing part of our lives and our overall social network of family, friends and peers," said Jennifer S. Li, M.D., M.H.S., chair of the writing group. "[Healthcare providers](#) should embrace its potential as a tool for promoting healthy behavioral change."

The writing group evaluated research on Internet-based interventions to lose weight, increase physical activity and improve [eating habits](#).

"The studies we looked at suggest that more [parental involvement](#) and more interaction with counselors and peers was associated with greater success rates for [overweight children](#) and teens who participated in an online intervention," said Li, division chief of [pediatric cardiology](#) at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C.

Variables that influenced success were whether the rest of the family was involved in the intervention, the degree of back-and-forth communication and feedback with a counselor or support group, and the frequency with which kids and adolescents logged on and used the programs.

People who are overweight or obese tend to share a home or spend their [leisure time](#) with others who are overweight or obese, according to research.

"Athletes tend to hang out with athletes, and overweight kids hang out together so they reinforce each other's eating habits or preferences for [recreational activities](#)," Li said.

About 95 percent of 12- to 17-year-old children have Internet access at home and/or in school, so online social network [health interventions](#) should be explored as an effective way to prevent or manage excessive weight, Li said.

"Some research shows that even in virtual social networks, people tend to associate with others like themselves," Li said. "So if you develop a network of kids who are overweight, you can have an impact on all of them—in the real world and online—because if one starts making healthy changes, the others will be influenced to do so as well."

However, the downsides to social media include exposure to cyber bullying, privacy issues, sexting and Internet addiction that can cause sleep deprivation, Li said.

"Doctors need to understand digital technology better so that they can offer guidance to patients and their families on avoiding such issues, and will be aware of any such problems that occur," Li said.

The authors recommend clinicians, policy makers and researchers ensure privacy protection, monitor outcomes and harness the strength of a health promotion social network to devise interventions that initiate and sustain behavior changes such self-monitoring, goal-setting and problem-solving.

More research is needed to provide data on overweight and obese adolescents to determine whether differences in gender, ethnicity, geographic location and socioeconomic status affect the efficacy and level of engagement with social media and technologically-based weight management interventions.

"Teenagers are texting and using Facebook and other social media as their primary communication with their peers, and we need to find out what factors can be incorporated into social media that will increase the effectiveness of these interventions to initiate and maintain weight loss in kids and adolescents," Li said.

Provided by American Heart Association

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