

Weight loss programs via virtual reality

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Weight loss is a topic of concern for nearly 36% of Americans who are considered obese. There are many barriers that can interfere with weight loss. For those attending face-to-face weight loss programs, barriers can include travel, conflict with work and home, need for childcare, and loss of anonymity.

In a new study released in the May/June 2013 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, investigators from The University of Kansas Medical Center continue to explore alternative weight management delivery methods to eliminate some of these barriers. The solution they are investigating—virtual reality for weight loss and weight maintenance.

Looking at the results from twenty overweight and [obese individuals](#) after 3 months of a weight loss program at a weekly clinic delivered via face-to-face or virtual reality and then 6 months of weight maintenance delivered via virtual reality, the investigators found virtual reality compares favorably with face-to-face for weight loss and may facilitate greater weight maintenance. Debra Sullivan, lead investigator, adds, "Although we found weight loss was significantly greater for face-to-face compared to virtual reality, weight maintenance was significantly better for virtual reality."

The virtual reality weight maintenance program was conducted using [Second Life](#), a Web-based [virtual reality environment](#) available to the public. Participants in Second Life create virtual representations of themselves, called "avatars," which can interact with other avatars and

navigate through the [virtual world](#) of Second Life. Voice communication is accomplished via headset, which allows for person-to-person and group interaction. Education and training takes place on an "island," which is purchased from Second Life and provides restricted group access to the [nutrition education](#)/training area.

To further explain how Second Life can be used in this capacity, Dr. Sullivan explains, "Individuals who want to participate in real-life scenarios without real-life repercussions can use virtual reality. For example, participants can practice meal planning, grocery shopping, and dietary control when eating at restaurants and holiday parties to a much greater extent with Second Life compared with the time-limited clinic meeting. Virtual reality may even be able to serve as a more feasible option to monitor individuals after completing a weight loss program."

More information: Sullivan, D. et al. Improving Weight Maintenance Using Virtual Reality (Second Life), *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 45, Issue 3 (May/June 2013).

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