

Heart-healthy lifestyles can spread through social networks

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Heart-healthy lifestyles can be contagious to your family and friends.

In a late-breaking clinical trial presented at the American Heart Association's Scientific Sessions 2013, people in social networks who received an intervention to tackle their weight problems together lost an average 6½ pounds more and trimmed an extra 1¼ inches from their waists compared with those who received standard individual care. In addition to weight and waistline benefits, the social network intervention also saw 4 to 5 mmHg drops in systolic and [diastolic blood pressure](#). Benefits lasted beyond the 10 month program up to even 6 months after.

Researchers with the Randomized Trial of Social Network Lifestyle Intervention for Obesity assigned groups of two to eight friends and family members per group into 'microclinic' social network clusters to attend weekly social and health activity sessions focused on physical activity, nutrition, and health education for 10 months in rural Kentucky, where medical care is limited and rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease are high.

Among the 552 participants—85.8 percent women and an average 51 years old—about 80 percent were obese. Average body mass index at enrollment was 36.2, regarded as morbidly obese.

The 10 month study with 16 month follow-up was the first rigorous long term randomized trial in the United States to test a concept of a 'microclinic' health contagion model of social networks (first

demonstrated in Jordan and the West Bank and developed by co-lead author Daniel Zoughbie, D. Phil.) that taps into the power of social networks to improve and promote health in people at risk for chronic diseases.

"Leveraging the social network and peer influences and social networks for support may be important for fighting obesity," said Eric L. Ding, Sc.D., lead author, epidemiologist and nutritionist at Harvard School of Public Health, and Director of Epidemiology at Microclinic International. "We need to focus on more than the individual obese patient in isolation, and look to family and friend networks and the communities where people live."

Clusters of friends and family can help both establish and spread healthy norms, such as regularly checking weight and blood sugar (if diabetic), exercising, watching calories, and eating fresh fruits and vegetables, he said.

In a subgroup retested at 16 months, a substantial majority of the decrease in weight, waist size, and blood pressure were maintained.

"Most [weight loss](#) programs do not have sustained weight loss beyond one year," said Ding, who is also a research faculty in the Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Zoughbie added, "Given the long-term sustained weight loss, we believe participants achieved sustained the [health](#) benefits after the program was over due to the strength of the Microclinic Behavioral Health Program in leveraging the power of their social network."

Provided by American Heart Association

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