

# Three 'hands on' nutrition classes: Enough to impact health behaviors in lower income women

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The knowledge and skills required to change poor nutrition and health behavior choices are often unavailable to those living with financial limitations. Competing demands on time and resources may pose obstacles to their achieving better diets. However, two researchers at the University of Minnesota recently completed a study that looked at the effects that three educational sessions might have on knowledge and behaviors of 118 low-income women of ethnically diverse backgrounds.

"Our research shows that with the right teaching experiences, having more classes may not be needed to reach our lower income population," says Chery Smith, PhD, MPH, RD, Professor, Department of Food Science and Nutrition, University of Minnesota. "This is really important for a group that is hard to reach, has transportation difficulties, and is extremely mobile due to work and housing changes."

Dr. Smith and former student Claire Rustad developed and taught three classes to lower income [women](#) of predominantly American Indian, African American, and white ethnicities. They used a holistic approach and experiential learning, as well as providing clear sets of instructions. The first class covered the "nuts and bolts" of [nutrition](#), including shopping, budgeting, and basics of macro- and micro-nutrients. In the second class, cooking techniques were emphasized, and in the third, participants learned about resources to increase food security, which included gardening.

After participating in the three classes, the women had increased vegetable intake, decreased fast food intake, and read labels more often. Data indicated that there were nine behaviors that improved after the session, as well as measures of knowledge. Increased knowledge and behavioral changes in a low-income population of women may help narrow inequalities in health, based on socioeconomic status.

"Ultimately, this study points to the efficacy of experiential learning in promoting [knowledge](#) acquisition and behavioral changes after education on a spectrum of nutrition topics in a short time frame, because it promotes immediate processing of information via stimulation of the senses," comments Dr. Smith.

Although the investigators demonstrated positive effects, Dr. Smith acknowledges that they do not know if the results will be sustained. However, she believes that using a comprehensive but short intervention is worthy of expanded research interest.

**More information:** "Nutrition Knowledge and Associated Behavior Changes in a Holistic, Short-term Nutrition Education Intervention with Low-Income Women," by Claire Rustad, MS, RD; Chery Smith, PhD, MPH, RD, appears in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, Volume 45, Issue 6 (November/December 2013)

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