MedicalXpress

Information technology can simplify weight-loss efforts; social support still important for success

April 29 2014

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 69 percent of adults in the United States are currently overweight or obese, which puts these individuals at increased risk for chronic health problems. Although weight loss decreases this risk, statistics show that dieters often fail multiple times before meeting their goals. Now, MU researchers have found that information technology, such as smartphone applications, can help dieters integrate healthy behavior changes into their daily lives.

"Current weight loss recommendations are essentially the same as they were decades ago, but each generation has to learn how to manage modern challenges to healthy living," said Cheryl Shigaki, an associate professor in the MU School of Health Professions. "Information technology repackages traditional weight loss strategies and provides new tools, such as exercise logs and nutritional databases, to implement that knowledge."

According to Shigaki, prior research on weight loss programming has shown that social and informational supports are important for individuals' dieting success, along with learning skills for self-management, problem-solving and behavior change. Smartphone apps can increase access to information, and people generally are willing to explore many different weight loss applications, Shigaki said. Although use of those apps may increase participants' engagement and persistence,

individuals still must practice accountability for their health behaviors to succeed, Shigaki said.

"When people use information technology to support their weight-loss efforts, they tend to access features that streamline the tracking of daily health behaviors, such as caloric intake and exercise, or that provide visual feedback on their overall progress, like graphs showing weight lost over time," Shigaki said. "Self-monitoring is key to successful weight loss, and information technology can make these tasks more convenient. We also found that people really liked getting feedback on their progress, which motivated them and helped them better evaluate their health behaviors and plan for future success."

Shigaki also studied individuals' perceptions of IT-based social support during weight loss programs and found that in-person social support was overwhelmingly preferred to creating new, online social networks based on common interests in wellness. She recommends that community health initiatives, such as workplace wellness programs, incorporate existing wellness apps to streamline behavior tracking while encouraging and enhancing in-person social support that information technologies cannot replace.

"People value workplace support, but companies probably should not attempt to develop their own social networking portals, which already exist and may not provide added value," Shigaki said. "They can get expensive very quickly. Organizations do not need to 'reinvent the wheel' when wellness programs can take advantage of information technologies consumers already use."

Shigaki's study, "Successful weight loss: how information technology is used to lose," was recently published in the *Journal of Telemedicine and e-Health*. Article co-authors include Richelle Koopman, from the MU Department of Family and Community Medicine; Allison Kabel, from

the MU School of Health Professions; and Shannon Canfield, from the MU Center for Health Policy. The study was funded by the Small Grant Funding Program of the MU Department of Family and Community Medicine and the Research Facilitation Fund Program of the MU School of Health Professions.