

## Study looks at how Twitter can be used to address specific health issues

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Childhood obesity is one of the top public health concerns in the United States, with 32 percent of youths aged 2-19 classified as obese as of 2012. As health problems such as childhood obesity grow, individuals and organizations have taken to Twitter to discuss the problem.

A new study, led by Jenine K. Harris, PhD, assistant professor at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, examined the use of the hashtag #childhoodobesity in tweets to track Twitter conversations about the issue of overweight kids.

The study published this month in the *American Journal of Public Health*, noted that conversations involving [childhood obesity](#) on Twitter don't often include comments from representatives of government and [public health organizations](#) that likely have evidence relating to how best to approach this issue.

"Childhood obesity is of great concern to the public health community," Harris said. "People are really talking about it on Twitter, and we saw an opportunity to better understand perceptions of the problem."

Twitter use is growing nationwide. In its 2014 Twitter update, the Pew Research Center found that Twitter is used more by those in lower-income groups, which traditionally are more difficult to reach with health information.

While younger Americans also are more likely to use Twitter, it is used

equally across education groups and is used more by non-white Americans than whites.

This, Harris said, is one of the reasons Twitter is an avenue that the academic and government sources with accurate health information should consider taking advantage of in order to reach a wide variety of people.

"I think [public health](#) so far doesn't have a great game plan for using social media, we're still laying the foundation for that," she said. "We're still learning what works.

"Public health communities, politicians, and government sources—people who really know what works—should join in the conversation. Then we might be able to make an impact," she said.

**More information:** *American Journal of Public Health*, [ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/ ... 105/AJPH.2013.301860](http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/.../105/AJPH.2013.301860)

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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