

Social networking can help people lose weight

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Social networking programmes designed to help people lose weight could play a role in the global fight against obesity, according to research.

Analysis by researchers from Imperial College London combining the results of 12 previous studies shows that such programmes have achieved modest but significant results in helping participants lose weight.

The paper is one of 10 reports on global healthcare policy written for the World Innovation Summit for Health (WISH), an initiative of Qatar Foundation, and published today in the journal *Health Affairs*.

Obesity is an increasing issue in developed and developing countries, contributing to other diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and [mental health problems](#) and resulting in rising costs for health services.

The inaugural WISH Summit in 2013 convened world experts to discuss innovative ways to address major global health issues, including obesity. One innovation they considered is the use of [social networking](#) sites such as Twitter and Facebook to provide obese people with a community of support from both clinicians and peers to help them lose weight.

The researchers compiled data from 12 studies spread across the US, Europe, east Asia and Australia which trialled social networking services for weight loss, involving 1,884 participants in total. The amalgamated

results showed that people who used these services achieved a collective decrease in body mass index by a value of 0.64, which the authors describe as modest but significant.

Health policy researcher and surgeon Dr Hutan Ashrafian, the lead author of the study at the Department of Surgery and Cancer, Imperial College London, said: "One advantage of using [social media](#) over other methods is that it offers the potential to be much more cost effective and practical for day-to-day use when compared to traditional approaches. The feeling of being part of a community allows patients to draw on the support of their peers as well as clinicians. They can get advice from their doctor without the inconvenience or cost of having to travel, and clinicians can provide advice to many patients simultaneously.

"There are also possible downsides, such as potential privacy issues and a need for the patient to be internet savvy, so it may not be right for everyone.

"The studies we looked at were the first to investigate social media approaches to obesity. There needs to be more research into this area to see what approaches work best for which patients in light of the dramatic global adoption of social media tools and content.

"The use of social media to treat obesity encourages patients to be more pro-active and empowers them to contribute towards their own treatment. It's not the only solution to the obesity epidemic, but it should be introduced as an element of every country's [obesity](#) strategy."

More information: H. Ashrafian et al. 'Social Networking Strategies That Aim To Reduce Obesity Have Achieved Significant Although Modest Results.' *Health Affairs* 33, No. 9 (2014) [DOI: 10.1377/hlthaff.2014.0370](https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2014.0370)

Provided by Imperial College London

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