

Primary care-based program helps overweight, middle-aged women increase physical activity

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Getting help from the family doctor may be a better way for overweight, middle-aged women to increase their physical activity, rather than trying to go it alone, according to a trial led by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Obesity and physical inactivity are significant risk factors for cardiovascular disease in middle-aged women.

The results, available online in the February issue of the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, show that obese, middle-aged women who participated in an exercise program based at their primary care doctor's office were more likely to continue to exercise over several months compared with those who were self-guided.

"Women who participated in programs in their doctor's office had a structured environment allowing them to focus on their lifestyle habits like eating and exercising, and make changes," said Molly Conroy, M.D., M.P.H., associate professor of medicine, epidemiology, and clinical and translational science at Pitt.

The Healthy Bodies Healthy Hearts investigators enrolled 99 inactive, overweight women ages 45 through 65 at three UPMC primary care offices at UPMC Montefiore, UPMC Shadyside and Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC. The women were randomly separated into two groups: one in which they participated in 12 weekly sessions at their

[primary care physician](#)'s office consisting of 30 minutes of discussion and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise; and a self-guided group that received a manual for independent use.

After three months, assessments showed that the women in the interventionist-led group had significantly higher levels of [physical activity](#), such as walking at a moderate pace, with improvements equal to about 90 minutes per week, compared to the self-guided women who improved by only about 30 minutes per week.

After a year, both groups reduced their level of [activity](#). The self-guided participants returned to pre-intervention activity levels; however, the interventionist-led women were still more active than they had been before participation by about 60 minutes of [exercise](#) per week.

"These outcomes imply that primary care-based interventions can be very beneficial to keep sedentary women motivated for several months. Many indicated their confidence was higher and that they felt more comfortable exercising with support. Follow-up sessions could help [women](#) over the long-term," said Dr. Conroy. "Future efforts should focus on finding the best way to sustain that activity, using resources available in the [primary care](#) setting."

Provided by University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences

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