

Study shows low-cost weight loss program has long-term results

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This is an image of a weight scale. Credit: CDC/Debora Cartagena

As America's obesity epidemic continues to grow, a new study from the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus shows that a low-cost, non-profit weight loss program offers the kind of long-term results that often elude dieters.

'We know that people lose weight and then gain it back,' said study

author Nia S. Mitchell, M.D., MPH, a researcher with the Division of General Internal Medicine at the Anschutz Health and Wellness Center at CU Anschutz. 'In this case, we found that people who renewed their annual membership in the program lost a clinically significant amount of weight and kept it off.'

Clinically significant [weight loss](#) is defined as losing 5 percent or more of one's body weight, because weight-related medical conditions, such as diabetes, can improve with that level of weight loss.

Mitchell's study focused on Take Off Pounds Sensibly (TOPS), a national, low-cost, [weight loss program](#) led by peer-volunteers and costing just \$92 a year (a \$32 annual fee plus nominal local chapter dues averaging about \$5 per month.) That's far less than other national programs.

The study included roughly 75,000 participants, and focused on those who renewed their annual memberships consecutively for up to seven years. Mitchell found that 50 percent of them had clinically significant weight loss in their first year in TOPS, and 62 percent of those who stayed with the program maintained that after seven years.

Mitchell said this was significant because:

- This is the first study of any national weight-loss program to report real-world weight changes and program retention for seven years.
- Participants who renewed their memberships each year were able to sustain a clinically significant weight loss for up to seven years.
- The program is low-cost and peer-led so it's easy to implement and disseminate widely.

Participants in TOPS attend weekly meetings during the weight loss and weight maintenance phases of the program, and the maintenance phase continues indefinitely.

Mitchell said that unlike many commercial and academic programs, there is a minimal difference between the weight-loss and weight-maintenance phases of the TOPS program, reinforcing weight management behaviors.

'Despite decades of obesity research two issues remain elusive in weight management: significant, long-term weight-loss maintenance and widely accessible programs,' she said. 'To reverse this epidemic we need to find programs that are effective at weight loss and maintenance, low-cost, and easy to implement and disseminate widely.'

According to Mitchell, TOPS appears to provide effective weight loss, weight loss maintenance, and affordability, which can be especially important to low-income, minority, and rural populations that may not have access to a structured weight loss program.

'As long-term weight loss is difficult to achieve in any clinical circumstance, TOPS may be a viable option to treat those who are overweight or obese,' she said.

The study was published recently in the *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*.

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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