

Making medical students healthier

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Vice President for Medical Affairs and Global Health Dr. Jerry Balentine leads a running group at NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine. Credit: Elaine Iandoli

Can activity monitors, exercise, and monthly wellness seminars help medical students improve fitness, reduce stress, and score higher on tests? And, through those techniques, will those future doctors be more

prepared to help their patients become healthier?

In what they believe to be the first long-term study of its kind, researchers at NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine (NYITCOM) have launched "Fit Physicians," a year-long, randomized pilot trial of 120 first-year medical students aimed at integrating [healthy habits](#) into the routines of tomorrow's doctors. As part of the project, 40 students have received Fitbit activity monitors, will attend monthly wellness lectures, and get regular feedback and motivational messages about their exercise regimens.

The study is measuring their physical activity, academic scores, sleep patterns, and stress levels against a control group and a third group that will wear fitness trackers, but not attend wellness or exercise programs. Researchers have conducted metabolic tests and body compositions scans of all students and will run the group through new tests next year to compare results.

Lead researcher Joanne Donoghue, Ph.D., an assistant professor and exercise physiologist at NYITCOM (and former Ironman competitor), says she believes Fit Physician is the only program of its kind in the nation and can serve as a model for integrating healthy habits into medical students' routines.

"We want to help medical students stay active and educate them on health and fitness while they transition to the demands of their first year of medical school," says Donoghue. "Our project is the first to examine if activity monitors alone are effective, or if promotional wellness activities to motivate students are needed in addition to the trackers."



Researcher Alex Stangle helps a first-year medical student with her new activity tracker. Credit: Elaine Iandoli

She added: "This is the next generation of physicians that can influence healthy lifestyles. Are these interventions in our study improving the students' own physical health and activity levels? I've yet to see a FitBit study of this topic and duration, or for this population."

Donoghue noted that the national Healthy People 2020 initiative calls for increasing the proportion of doctor office visits that include education and counseling on physical activity. Yet, medical students often receive little in the way of health promotion or physical activities in their curricula.

Alexander Stangle, a student researcher on the Fit Physician study, says busy medical students often forgo exercise, skip meals, or develop

unhealthy eating habits as they adjust to the pressure and time constraints of school.

"You spend so much time studying and in labs where you're not active," says Stangle, who is spending an extra year at NYITCOM to study and conduct the research. "I'm also hoping people will gain an understanding of the health issues [medical students](#) face."

The monthly wellness education seminars for the main study group will run from September to May. Topics include stretching, strength training, nutrition, biomechanics, and how to motivate patients to exercise. Many of those students also have joined the school's weekly running and walking sessions with Dean Wolfgang Gilliar, DO and Vice President for Medical Affairs and Global Health Jerry Balentine, DO, a co-investigator for the study.

"As a [medical school](#), we need to be a leader in promoting health and wellness for our students, our faculty members, our patients at the Riland Academic Health Care Center, and the patients of the future," says Balentine.

Provided by New York Institute of Technology

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