

# Research shows online interventions with social support help middle-aged adults with obesity lose weight

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Obesity is a problem in the United States. In fact, 42.5% of U.S. adults aged 20 and over have the disease. Not only is obesity the nation's second leading cause of preventable death (behind only smoking cigarettes), it also leads to other serious health issues, including an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, cancer, sleep apnea and liver disease. The disease and its side effects impose a significant financial burden on America's health care system.

As many make—and often fail to keep—New Year's resolutions about exercise and weight loss goals, University of Missouri researcher Mansoo Yu has completed a long-term study that highlights which specific features of online weight loss interventions are most likely to lead to long-term weight loss and maintenance. Yu found that counseling with professional health coaches and social support from other users are the two most beneficial features of online weight-loss programs for middle-aged adults (ages 35–55) with obesity or overweight.

The study, "Effectiveness of different online intervention modalities for middle-aged adults with overweight and obesity: A 20-year systematic review and meta-analysis," was recently [published](#) in *Journal of Prevention*.

The findings can help the public choose from among the seemingly infinite number of online weight loss interventions available in today's digital age.

"Not only are there physical health issues related to obesity, but individuals with obesity are also at higher risk for [mental health issues](#) such as depression, poor self-esteem and [social isolation](#)," said Mansoo Yu, a professor in the MU College of Health Sciences. "My research is at the intersection of social work and [public health](#), and my goal is to help people live happier, healthier lives."

## Don't go at it alone

In the study, Yu collaborated with Kyung Jung Han, a former MU doctoral student who is an associate professor at California State University, Bakersfield. The pair examined 20 years of existing published research on the topic of various online interventions geared toward helping those with obesity lose weight. They identified which online features were associated with the most significant long-term weight loss.

"The three categories of online interventions we evaluated were those that only provided educational information and self-monitoring tools, those that had an online 'group chat' function where participants could share their progress with their peers and befriend each other, and finally those that included a professional health coach who could answer any questions participants had," Yu said. "The interventions with access to social support from other participants or professional health coaches were as effective as in-person weight loss interventions."

Yu added that for people who live in [rural areas](#), where individuals experience obesity at higher rates, online interventions can provide more accessibility, flexibility and convenience as well as reduce transportation times and costs.

"The key is picking the online intervention with the most effective features, such as access to social support from other participants and professional health coaches," Yu said. "Our research, which took eight years to complete, combed through 20 years' worth of published research in order to provide the broader community with the best evidence-based recommendations."

For those with New Year's resolutions surrounding weight loss and more exercise, Yu recommends the following tips:

1. Sharing your resolution with friends, [family members](#), [significant others](#) and colleagues to increase accountability and [social support](#).
2. Scheduling some form of physical activity into your daily routine.
3. Checking in with others to see how their resolutions are going and offering words of encouragement.
4. Having friendly competition with peers to see who walked or ran more steps each day.
5. Asking professional health coaches for evidence-based advice when it comes to exercise or diet-related questions.

**More information:** Kyung Jung Han et al, Effectiveness of Different Online Intervention Modalities for Middle-Aged Adults with Overweight and Obesity: A 20-Year Systematic Review and Meta-analysis, *Journal of Prevention* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10935-023-00761-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-023-00761-z)

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