

Study shows importance of coaching as part of lifestyle programs for women planning pregnancy

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Personalized support by health professionals is critical to optimizing women's engagement and motivation in lifestyle programs, and improves outcomes for women planning to conceive, Monash University research

has found.

Monash Centre for Health Research and Implementation (MCHRI) researchers found that women planning pregnancy seek credible, evidence-based information to improve health, which may improve health prior to pregnancy and reduce pregnancy complications.

Published in *Nutrients*, the [study](#) analyzed the healthy lifestyle program OptimalMe.

This online and phone-and-video-based program aims to empower and assist women in optimizing their health, advocating for healthy dietary habits and regular exercise, and maintaining a healthy weight throughout the preconception period and into pregnancy. It also provides valuable information on preconception care guidelines.

Coaching sessions utilize a personalized digital preconception health checklist and establish self-directed, sustainable lifestyle goals. Participants define healthy lifestyle objectives, develop action plans, and receive feedback and [positive reinforcement](#) from coaches.

The study results show that women's program engagement and usage were significantly higher when they had access to personalized [coaching](#) support, in combination with engaging, interactive and relevant digital content. Usage of the digital platform and behavior change tools reduced when the coaching ended.

Associate Professor Cheryce Harrison led the program with Professor Helena Teede and a dedicated team.

"Women planning to conceive spend a lot of time researching information online and come across a lot of misinformation," Professor Teede said. "We found that women value credible accurate information

and giving them an opportunity to work with a health professional is critical—it keeps them well-informed and motivated."

OptimalMe was available for free to over 300 Medibank members.

Ninety percent of participants said they would recommend it to family or friends planning a pregnancy. The program is now being updated and a new version focused on pregnancy and post-partum will be launched this year for women attending Monash Health. The long-term goal is to make it accessible to women across Australia, and expand the program to include inter-conception, the time between pregnancies.

Kate Pryce participated in OptimalMe, and is now pregnant with her second child.

"I was very overwhelmed when I started looking for information on conception and pregnancy, but OptimalMe provided information in a short and easy-to-understand format, and because it was coming from [health professionals](#) I felt reassured that it was the right advice," Pryce said.

"The best part of the program was the face-to-face coaching. I loved the sessions, the chance to ask all my questions, even the small ones, and it prompted me to ask my doctor questions down the track."

Another recently published analysis of the program showed that OptimalMe effectively encouraged women to make positive changes to lifestyle behavior, including areas such as alcohol consumption.

Dr. Bonnie Brammall emphasized the importance of personalized coaching as the cornerstone of lifestyle programs.

"The current study's results highlight the pivotal role of personalized

coaching delivered by either phone or video, which shows the potential for scalable and cost-effective remotely delivered health promotion programs," Dr. Brammall said.

"This not only improves access but also underscores the reach of digital interventions in effectively supporting women on their reproductive journey. These findings are applicable to programs aiming to reach and impact other populations and areas of health."

Professor Helena Teede added, "Leveraging insights from this study, we are developing a user-centric digital platform, supported by coaching, to partner with women throughout their [pregnancy](#) journey. Our ongoing program development is currently focused on serving women within Monash Health."

More information: Bonnie R. Brammall et al, OptimalMe Program: A Mixed Method Investigation into the Engagement and Acceptability of a Preconception Digital Health Lifestyle Intervention with Individual Coaching for Women's Health and Behaviour Change, *Nutrients* (2024). [DOI: 10.3390/nu16050572](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu16050572)

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