Online coaching improves choices of women experiencing pregnancy difficulties

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Personalised coaching through a smartphone platform can help women improve their lifestyle behaviours in the period before and shortly after they become pregnant, a new study has shown. The biggest reduction in behaviours that pose risks to pregnancy were seen in overweight women.

The findings, published in the journal *Reproductive Biomedicine Online*, show that digital healthcare could be a cost-effective way to deliver tailored advice to women who experience difficulties in pregnancy, which the NHS does not have the resources to provide.

In this study, led by the University of Southampton, 262 women who were planning pregnancies and had either experienced difficulties in conceiving or recurrent miscarriages signed up to the online lifestyle coaching programme Smarter Pregnancy. All participants completed questionnaires through the app at the beginning and at six-week intervals over the four-month trial. The questionnaires covered subjects such as their diet, folic acid intake, smoking and consumption of alcohol.

After each questionnaire, half of the participants (the intervention group) were sent automated advice and recommendations through the coaching platform, based on their responses. The other half (the control group) were referred to standard guidance for periconceptional care on the NHS website.

Analysis of the responses to the questionnaires showed that the group receiving advice through the Smarter Pregnancy platform were more likely to make positive changes to their lifestyle over the course of the trial than participants in the control group. The most significant change was in the reduction in smoking and drinking alcohol for those with a Body Mass Index above 25 (overweight). The findings also showed that the odds of becoming pregnant after 24 weeks were increased for the participants using the app, although the study team note that more research would be needed to validate this connection as this study was targeted on improving lifestyle choices rather than assessing pregnancy rates.

Dr. Bonnie Ng, MRC Fellow in Clinical and Experimental Sciences at the University of Southampton said, "Our trial shows that digital

healthcare tools can help women improve their lifestyle and the health of their babies.

"Using this tool, women can take control of their own body, and it also removes the impression that they are being 'told off' when they see their doctor.

"I truly hope that we can use this e-health platform in the future to offer women tailored advice."

More information: Ka Ying Bonnie Ng et al, Smartphone-based lifestyle coaching modifies behaviours in women with subfertility or recurrent miscarriage: a randomized controlled trial, *Reproductive BioMedicine Online* (2021). DOI: 10.1016/j.rbmo.2021.04.003

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