

Fact Sheet: Internet as a tool for Weight and Health Management

Obesity, in the majority of cases, is a preventable condition, and mounting evidence suggests that lifestyle intervention can affect weight loss and maintenance as well as reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases in those at high risk. With increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity, an estimated 84 million US adults are nowadays trying to lose weight by a moderate healthy diet plan that can be incorporated into their busy lifestyle.

The Internet provides a unique opportunity for development and implementation of lifestyle intervention programs that help promote self-managed behavioral changes. A systematic online program will allow people to make use of self-monitoring of food intake and physical activity to promote their weight loss or maintenance anytime, anywhere.

- ❖ Internet users have substantially grown from 22% of the population in 1997 to 75% in 2004, more than a 200% increase, and it can be used as a convenient and flexible tool for health information or care (*Pew/Internet, 2006*).
- ❖ More than 80% of Internet users have looked for health information over the Internet in 2004. The three major topics searched by Internet users are as follows:
 - Specific disease or medical problem : 66%
 - Diet, nutrition, or nutritional supplements : 51%
 - Exercise and fitness : 42%
- ❖ More than 50% of Internet users have visited Web sites with online support, and more than 30 % Internet users exchanged health information via email with others.
- ❖ Self-monitoring and individualized feedback/counseling are one of the most important factors to success of weight loss and maintenance, which can be delivered by the Internet.
- ❖ Internet interventions for weight loss or maintenance have been shown to be as effective as or better than face-to-face interventions (*Harvey-Berino et al., 2002 & 2004, Tate et al., 2001 & 2003*).
- ❖ Web-based program was more effective than print materials in producing improvements in diet and nutrition of employees (Cook et al. 2007).

Given that the prevalence of obesity continues to increase in the US and it becomes a significant public health concern, effective weight control programs would help improve health status of individuals and avoid a substantial amount of health care costs associated with obesity and related diseases. User-friendly Internet programs with interactive communication and continuous support system will help individuals lose weight and stay motivated to accomplish their weight control and wellness goals at a relatively low cost.

References

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