
Personal Contact Helps Maintain Weight Loss

Interactive Web sites may also help, at least for a while, study finds

By Serena GordonHealthDay Reporter

TUESDAY, March 11 (HealthDay News) -- Statistics on maintaining weight loss are often dismal, but a new study finds that when people have monthly personal contact with a weight-loss professional, they're able to keep off more weight.

The study also found that people using an interactive Web site were more likely to maintain their weight loss than people who didn't, but only for two years. After two years, the beneficial effect began to wane.

"Two and a half years after weight loss, the personal contact group had gained less weight. The difference was only 3.3 pounds [between the personal contact group and the interactive technology group], but even small amounts of weight loss can improve health," said study lead author Dr. Laura Svetkey, a professor of medicine at Duke University Medical Center.

Results of the study are published in the March 12 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association and are to be presented that same day at the American Heart Association's annual meeting in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Almost 1,700 overweight or obese people were recruited for the study. In addition to excess weight, all of the volunteers had either high blood pressure, high cholesterol or both. Almost 40 percent of the study participants were black, and more than one-third were men. Svetkey said these factors were important, because blacks and men tend to be underrepresented in weight-loss studies.

The first phase of the study was a six-month weight loss program. Groups of dieters met every week for group-based behavioral intervention treatment. Goals for treatment were 180 minutes of exercise each week, reducing caloric intake and adopting the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet. The weight loss goal per week was one to two pounds.

The average weight loss in the first phase was just under 19 pounds, the study authors said.

During the second phase, study volunteers were randomly assigned to one of three groups for maintenance -- the "personal contact" group, the "interactive technology" group, and the "self-directed" group. The personal contact group was contacted 12 times each year by a counselor -- three times in person and nine times by phone. The interactive technology group had unlimited access to a special weight-loss Web site

designed by the researchers. The "self-directed" group was urged to maintain their weight loss but received no further intervention.

After 30 months, the personal contact group had regained an average of 8.8 pounds less than the self-directed group. The difference between the personal contact group and the interactive technology group was 3.3 pounds.

"I think that the tools we used in the weight loss phase and then tried to reinforce in the maintenance phase may have been easier to reinforce in an in-person setting," Svetkey said. "There's something about human contact that seems to make a big difference."

Dr. Kelly Machesky is medical director of the St. John Weight Loss Institute in Michigan. She said, "I believe the crux of [the personal contact group's success] has to do with someone else taking an interest in seeing the outcome."

Overall, 71 percent of the study volunteers maintained at least some weight loss over 30 months.

"Change is possible. Truly, you can make a difference with simply reducing caloric intake and increasing energy expenditure," said Machesky, who added that this study's finding suggests that surrounding yourself with people who are supportive could also be helpful.

More information

The Weight-control Information Network has more on weight loss for life.

SOURCES: Laura Svetkey, M.D., professor of medicine, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, N.C.; Kelly Machesky, M.D., medical director, St. John Weight Loss Institute, Shelby Township, Mich.; March 12, 2008, Journal of the American Medical Association



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