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Mobile apps significantly aid weight loss

With obesity levels on the increase around the globe, dieting has never been more essential. However, with so many different approaches on offer, with varying results, it is hard to know which diet might best suit any given individual. In a controlled trial carried out by researchers from Northwestern Medicine, one discovery that may help steer a clearer weight loss course, is that dieters that utilised a mobile app in conjunction with traditional interactive group support, lost weight and kept it off considerably more successfully.

The compelling year-long study followed 69 overweight and obese adults, primarily men, with an average age of 58. All participants were given the opportunity to attend health education classes in nutrition, exercise and behavioural change. The classes met bi-monthly for six months and then once a month for the following six months. Participants were given weekly calorie and exercise goals to meet, based on their current weight and activity levels.

Within the trial, the participants were randomly selected to either record their food intake and exercise on a piece of paper, or to make use of the mobile weight loss app. The app invites users to input their data directly into a mobile phone; not only ensuring instant feedback on whether they have reached their daily activity and calorie goals, but also transmitting data to a behavioural coach. This coach reviews the data and contacts participants approximately twice a month for a 10 to 15 minute telephone coaching session.

The study found that, on average, participants who used the mobile app attended 80% of the education sessions - loosing an average of 15 pounds each. Participants who used the app, but failed to attend the sessions, lost an average of 8.6 pounds each, while the paper group, who attended the sessions but did not use the app, did not lose any weight, on average.

Although there are already many weight loss apps in circulation, lead researcher, Bonnie Spring, says that this is the first time that a weight loss app – in this case designed by health researchers - has been proven effective in a randomised, clinical trial published in a peer-reviewed journal. The study is the first to conclusively demonstrate that technology can make traditional weight loss programmes more effective at achieving sustained weight loss. "Most of us have no idea how many calories we consume and how much physical activity we get. The app gives you feedback on this and helps you make smart decisions in the moment. This approach empowers patients to help themselves on a day-to-day basis," explained Spring.