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Reach and Use of a Health Promotion Program of Sequential Emails at Work

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Background: US adults report sub-optimal physical activity and fruit & vegetable intake and the prevalence of obesity continues to rise. Public health and medical care systems need innovative strategies to promote healthy behaviors among adult populations. Increasingly worksites offer uniform, daily electronic mail (email) and internet access. Thus, worksite email offers an alternative mechanism by which health promotion information can be disseminated.

Methods: This prospective, cohort study assessed the feasibility, reach, and use of 6 months of sequential email messages delivered Monday-Friday to participant worksite email addresses. The emails provided succinct strategies to encourage physical activity or increase fruit and vegetable intake and links to more detailed, informational websites. Program reach was assessed by participant diversity, and number of emails opened, days opening emails, and web-links clicked.

Results: All employees at one company (n=960) were invited to participate. Forty percent (388 of 960) consented and, of these, 345 (36% of employees) completed the baseline health-assessment. Participating employees were female (87%) and white (91%) with a mean age (standard deviation) of 43.7 (8.7) years. These numbers parallel the total worksite employee profile.

After 6 months, 82% of 345 participants had opened ? 50% of the daily emails. In addition, 84% of participants continued to open emails through week 21, and 75% through week 24. Open rates did not vary by gender, age, income, education, ethnicity, or baseline health behavior.

Conclusions: Initial enrollment and sustained email open rates document broad reach and employee acceptance, and indicate potential value of electronic communications for health promotion. A randomized trial across 19 worksites is evaluating associated changes in physical activity and fruit and vegetable intake. Traditional health promotion programs are labor-intensive and costly to reach a broad employee or community base. In contrast, email and web-based programs have the potential to reach broad, diverse populations at small incremental costs.