Weight Gain Prevention: Identifying Targets for Health Behavior Change in Young Adults Attending College

Kathryn A. Strong

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Brenda M. Davy, PhD, RD, Chair
Kathy Hosig, PhD, RD
Elena Serrano, PhD
Richard Winett, PhD

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ABSTRACT

The increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity suggests that current policies and interventions have been inadequate to counteract the driving forces. Young adults attending college gain weight at a faster rate than the general population (1-3), without evidence of compensatory weight loss (2). Therefore, college may be an important stage for the primary prevention of obesity. We sought to identify weight gain mediators in college underclassmen using the social cognitive model for health behavior change. Eligible students living on-campus to underwent assessments of height, weight, waist circumference, blood pressure, body composition, cardiorespiratory fitness, habitual physical activity and dietary intake, and psychosocial determinants of health behavior change. We conducted elicitation interviews and focus group discussions to identify themes related to the diet and physical activity habits, attitudes, social norms, and experiences of the target population. Results found that students were generally physically fit and enjoyed a variety of physical activities, yet spent considerable amounts of time in sedentary activity and had difficulty exercising regularly. Healthy eating perceptions were instilled by parents; however, families are much less influential in college, and students almost always eat with friends. Healthy eating and exercise habits were secondary to several other responsibilities. Skills in planning, goal setting, and self-monitoring are necessary to overcome the social and environmental forces contributing to weight gain. These results will be used to develop a social cognitive theory-based intervention to improve health behaviors, and consequently prevent weight gain in young adults attending college.