

Offering a Free Online Program to Maintain Weight Over the Holiday Season

Abstract

The Holiday Challenge is a free weight maintenance program offered from Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve. Ninety-three percent of participants maintained or lost weight during the 2014 Holiday Challenge, and 99% said they were very likely to somewhat likely to participate again in the 2015 Holiday Challenge.

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Introduction

Unhealthy eating and inactivity are common during the holiday season between Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve. The average holiday weight gain for Americans is one pound (Roberts & Mayer, 2000; Yanovski et al., 2000). Although this weight gain is not clinically significant, too often the weight is not lost and accumulates each year, which can lead to long-term health implications (Schoeller, 2014). The holiday season is not necessarily the best time to promote weight loss; however, weight maintenance may be a better goal. Maintaining weight over the holidays may be a positive measure of

success. There are many free online weight tracking programs that have proven to be successful (Hwang et al., 2008), but little is known about online support specific to the holiday season. Beginning in 2006, the Holiday Challenge was created to address the issue of holiday weight gain between Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve.

Methods

The Holiday Challenge was originally developed by the North Carolina Division of Public Health for residents of North Carolina. The program has grown over the years and has expanded to other states. The Holiday Challenge is available free of charge to anyone with a valid email address. The 7-week program includes a variety of resources for participants delivered via email and the Internet. Over the course of the Holiday Challenge, there are seven newsletters, seven weekly challenges, 31 daily tips, and 27 healthy recipes (Figure 1). Participants are able to interact online through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.

Figure 1.

A Portion of the First Newsletter Sent to Participants of the 2014 Holiday Challenge



In 2014, the Holiday Challenge was promoted through a variety of methods, with email being the primary method. Emails were distributed through various professional organizations and partners of the Division of Public Health, NC State University, and the Eat Smart, Move More, Weigh Less program (a 15-week weight management program offered in North Carolina) (Dunn, Kolasa, Vodicka,

Schneider, & Thomas, 2001). In 2013, the Holiday Challenge became a part of Eat Smart, Move More, Weigh Less and began to be promoted to all program participants. Promotional materials to encourage group involvement, including flyers and a worksite guide, were available to download from the Eat Smart, Move More, Weigh Less website.

Results

The 2014 Holiday Challenge had a total of 12,537 participants, almost double the number from previous years. Seventy-three percent of participants in 2014 were new to the program. Fifty percent of the participants were from North Carolina, with all 100 counties represented. All 50 States and Canada were represented. According to registration records, the majority of participants heard about the Holiday Challenge at work (46%) and through Eat Smart, Move More, Weigh Less (a weight management program) (24%).

Participation in the pre- and post-challenge survey was voluntary. The response rate for the pre-challenge survey was 42%. The response rate for the post-challenge survey was 19%. When participants were asked about their weight in the pre-challenge survey, 79% reported being slightly or very overweight. Eighty four percent of participants said that they were trying to lose weight, and 14% said they were trying to maintain their weight.

Based upon results of the post-challenge survey, 67% of participants maintained their weight, and 26% lost three to five pounds at the completion of the Holiday Challenge. Seventy-seven percent indicated they were confident they could continue to maintain or lose weight, and 97% said they will continue to use the strategies learned during the Holiday Challenge (Table 1).

Table 1.

Post-Challenge Survey
Question: How Confident Are
You That You Can Continue
to Maintain or Lose Weight
Using These Strategies?
(n=2,394)

Responses	%
Very Confident	36.5
Fairly Confident	40.4
Somewhat Confident	17.5
A Little Confident	5.4
Not at all Confident	0.2
Total	100.0

Conclusion

The 2014 Holiday Challenge had the highest number of participants since it was created in 2006. The increase in participation was perhaps due to expanded marketing efforts, especially in regards to Eat Smart, Move More, Weigh Less program participants. The large participation indicates the need for simple, Web-based approaches to provide information on healthy eating and physical activity during the holiday season. The Holiday Challenge encourages worksites to use the resources provided to create a work environment that supports healthy lifestyles. Whether participating individually or with coworkers, overall feedback from participants for the 2014 Holiday Challenge was very positive. Future efforts to expand the reach of the Holiday Challenge should include: promoting the program earlier in the year, identifying new partners to assist with marketing of the program, and working through Extension and public health networks to promote the program more broadly outside of North Carolina.

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