

## Health Coaches to Help Fight Obesity? Could Be Cost Effective

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Coaches have always had an important influence on improving athletic skills and guiding athletes to their greatest potential. Can a similar type of coach have the same influence on patients battling obesity?

**According to the findings of a recent pilot study by researchers from the Miriam Hospital's Weight Control and Diabetes Research Center, health coaches can play an important role in weight loss.**

Obesity is a serious and costly disease in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one-third of American adults are obese. Obesity is not only a health problem, but also has severe impacts on the nation's health care system, costing millions of dollars every year.

In the first study of its kind, the volunteers who took part in a low-intensity behavioral weight loss program, and were supported by either a peer coach or a health professional coach, were found to have impressive results regarding weight loss (5% or more of their initial body weight).

Lead author Tricia M. Leahey, Ph.D., of The Miriam Hospital's Weight Control and Diabetes Research Center says:

*"Although these findings are only preliminary, it's encouraging that lay health coaches successfully supplemented a less intensive, lower cost behavioral intervention and that their weight losses were actually comparable to those produced by professional coaches - something that could be critical in this changing health care landscape."*

Health coaches serve as ongoing support, accountability, and provide information and promote behavioral change outside of treatment visits. Types of coaches can range from:

- A master coach or mentor - someone who has previously and successfully dealt with the same health situation.
- Professional health care providers such as a nurse or social worker - or individuals or peers currently facing the same health problem who can help coach one another to achieve change.

During the study, 44 adults took part in a behavioral group weight loss program that met 12 times over the course of 24 weeks. This is generally half the number of sessions in a traditional treatment plan.

Miriam researchers assigned participants to one of three different types of health coaches:

- Mentor (successful weight loser)
- Peer (fellow group member)

- Professional (nurse, doctor, social worker)

They had all been trained on how to provide feedback, as well as understanding various relevant coaching strategies.

The researchers reported the following findings:

- Those with a peer coach lost over 9% of their body weight.  
Half of them lost 10% or more.
- Participants with a professional coach also lost at least 9% of their body weight.  
Half of them lost 10% or more.
- The volunteers in the mentor group lost an average of 6% of their body weight.  
Just 17% lost 10% or more.

The authors explained that a 10% reduction in body weight is enough to significantly lower the risk of developing obesity-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease.

This was only a pilot study; therefore, larger trials are needed to affirm whether incorporating health coaches into a less intensive weight loss program maximizes outcomes. Further studies should also gauge the effectiveness of different types of coaches.

### **What is Obesity?**

Obese people have so much fat built up in their bodies that it can have a detrimental effect on their health. If an individual's body weight is at least 20% higher than the ideal weight for their height, sex and age, then they are considered obese. People with a BMI (Body Mass Index) of 30 or more are obese, overweight people have a BMI of between 25 and 29.99.

People become obese after consuming too many calories each day, leading sedentary lifestyles (not doing enough exercise), not getting enough sleep, leading stressful lives, eating and drinking the wrong kinds of foods/drinks, developing or having certain illnesses, and taking medications which cause weight gain.

Obesity raises the risk of developing several diseases and conditions, including osteoarthritis, coronary heart disease, gallbladder disease, hypertension (high blood pressure), dyslipidemia (high cholesterol and triglycerides), respiratory problems, several cancers, sleep apnea, stroke, and Type 2 diabetes.

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### **References:**

*"A Randomized Controlled Pilot Study Testing Three Types of Health Coaches for Obesity Treatment: Professional, Peer, and Mentor"*

Tricia M. Leahey and Rena R. Wing | Obesity (25 June 2012) | doi:10.1038/oby.2012.179