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Community-wide Weight Challenge May Slow Weight Gain in Adults

Minneapolis, Minn. — A weight management challenge targeting an entire community may help overweight or obese participants lose weight and healthy weight participants avoid weight gain, according to [research published online](#) in *Obesity Science & Practice* ahead of publication in the journal. The research showed that a low-intensity weight management challenge in a rural Minnesota community was associated with a modest, but statistically significant, average weight loss of 2 percent (about 4 pounds) over one year among adults who were overweight or obese at enrollment.

The community-wide weight challenge was conducted in conjunction with Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project (HONU), which is designed to reduce community members' risk factors for cardiovascular disease (CVD). HONU is a population health demonstration project of the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation® (MHIF) in partnership with Allina Health's New Ulm Medical Center and the community of New Ulm, Minn.

"Since the HONU Project began in 2009, we had observed some rather impressive improvements in CVD risk factors among community members, such as blood pressure and cholesterol control, as well as increased fruit and vegetable consumption. But we really had not seen a noticeable improvement in body weight," said Rebecca Lindberg, MPH, RD, director of population health from Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation, and member of the research team. "Given the single health care system in New Ulm and existing HONU population health surveillance activities using the electronic health record, this study offered an uncommon opportunity to gauge the impact of a weight management challenge across the entire community."

The LOSE IT TO WIN IT Challenge

As part of HONU's interventions, LOSE IT to WIN IT (LIWI) was implemented from June 2013 to December 2014 as a free community-wide health challenge offered to all adults who live or work in the New Ulm community. LIWI was open to adults of any weight, as it was designed to help those who were overweight (BMI ≥ 25 kg/m²) lose weight, and help those who were already at a healthy weight avoid weight gain. The low-intensity, lifestyle approach aimed to reach all adult community members and reward them for making healthier lifestyle choices toward a general goal of improved weight control. The community health challenge was tailored and adapted using the incentaHEALTH™ platform that is designed to deliver incentives to individuals for weight loss. HONU adapted the general platform for New Ulm with supplemental strategies, educational materials, community resources and input from a community advisory board.

While the program used some individual incentives, New Ulm community chose a community-wide incentive model when LIWI was developed. The incentive amount was based on enrollment numbers as well as weight outcomes, and resulted in an earned incentive of nearly \$60,000 to purchase outdoor exercise equipment for the community to use in local parks. Program content was delivered to individuals primarily through daily motivational emails and an online

health guide and other resources. About 10 percent of all adult residents of New Ulm participated in LIWI, with particularly strong participation from area worksites.

One interesting finding that researchers noted was that LIWI participants who were *not* overweight or obese lost about 1 percent of their body weight over one year. “The reach of the challenge into the healthy weight population, many of whom would presumably consider a weight management challenge program unnecessary, was surprising,” said lead author Jeffrey VanWormer, PhD, who serves as a scientific consultant for The Heart of New Ulm Project. “The typical U.S. adult can expect to gain about 2 pounds each year, so this challenge seemed to be particularly impactful with participants who were seeking to prevent weight gain.”

The research team concluded that low-intensity weight management challenges like LIWI can result in modest, but statistically significant, weight loss for overweight/obese participants over time. Such challenge programs may be more helpful in terms of weight gain prevention, but more research is still needed on the optimal use/mix of resources to address weight management at the community level, as the program had minimal impact on broader weight gain trends across the whole community. Alongside continued improvements in clinical care, public policy and the built environment related to obesity, low-intensity weight management challenges have the potential to help slow overweight/obesity trends if they can be constructed in ways that sustain engagement by large fractions of the communities they target.

More information on The Heart of New Ulm Project and the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation’s population health research is available at www.mhifpopulationhealth.org.

About Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation

The Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation (MHIF) strives to create a world without heart and vascular disease. To achieve this bold vision, it is dedicated to improving the cardiovascular health of individuals and communities through innovative research and education.

- *Scientific Innovation and Research* — MHIF is a recognized research leader in the broadest range of cardiovascular medicine and population health initiatives. Each year MHIF leads more than 175 active research projects and publishes more than 175 peer-reviewed abstracts. Cardiologists, hospitals and communities around the world adopt MHIF protocols to save lives, improve care and create healthier living opportunities.
- *Education and Outreach* — MHIF provides more than 10,000 hours of education each year putting its research into practice to improve outcomes. And, MHIF leads cutting-edge, transformative population health research to connect, engage, inform and empower individuals and communities to improve their health.

The Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation’s work is funded by generous donors and sponsors and supports research initiatives of Minneapolis Heart Institute® at Abbott Northwestern Hospital. Minneapolis Heart Institute® physicians provide care for patients at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis and at 38 community sites across Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

About Allina Health

Allina Health is dedicated to the prevention and treatment of illness and enhancing the greater health of individuals, families and communities throughout Minnesota and western Wisconsin. A not-for-profit health care system, Allina Health cares for patients from beginning to end-of-life through its 90+ clinics, 12 hospitals, 15 retail pharmacies, specialty care centers and specialty medical services, home care, home oxygen and medical equipment and emergency medical transportation services.