Development and Effectiveness of Weight Loss Group Visits in a Community Health Center

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Background

- Obesity is extremely common in primary care settings and is associated with many chronic conditions
- Primary care providers often do not have time to provide intensive dietary counseling for weight loss
- Studies have shown that group weight loss counseling is at least as effective as individual counseling

Project Setting

- Denver Health is an integrated health care system that serves a low income population (most patients at less than 200% of federal poverty level)
- Our patient population has a high rate of obesity (over 40%) and has limited access to nutrition counseling or weight loss services.

Goals

- Provide education on diet and exercise to overweight and obese patients
- Encourage patients to attend classes for 5 weeks, to keep records of food intake and physical activity, and to set goals
- Help patients lose 1-2 pounds per week during the class
- Provide counseling in a group setting to enhance level of support

Project Description

- 5 weekly classes, 90 minutes each, offered once per quarter
- Classes led by RN, co-led by CRNP or MD
- Patient handouts copied from NIH series “Aim for a Healthy Weight” and supplements with educational materials from the American Dietetic Association
- Visual aids used in addition (soft drink cans, plastic portion size models, test tubes with sample amounts of fat grams)
- Specific topics: calorie and fat gram counting; portion control; healthy meal preparation and eating out; label reading; physical activity
- Denver Health is able to bill for these visits by conducting a brief physical assessment at the time of the visit and by individualizing patients’ self-management goals.

Results

Figure 1

Patients expressing interest or referred by PCP
180 total (n ~ 25.7 patients per quarter)

Attended first class: 58 patients
(n ~ 8.3 per quarter)

Attended 3 or more classes or attended class 4 or 5:
47 patients (n ~ 6.7 per quarter)

Figure 2: Average Weight Loss During Group Visits and at Follow-up

- Average duration from end of groups to follow-up was 21 weeks (range: 2 weeks to 44 weeks)

Conclusions

- We can achieve weight loss in a low-income, predominantly ethnic minority primary care population
- Weight losses among those who complete the 5-week program average nearly 1 pound per week, similar to what would be observed in commercial weight loss programs
- Weight regain was noted within several months of ending the class, as is typically seen with lifestyle interventions
- Patient evaluation data (not shown) showed that they generally enjoyed the class and are glad to be offered this service
- Anecdotal impressions of group leaders indicate challenges in running a group visit in an unscreened patient population

Limitations

- Low level of education in our patient population. Most patients do not have basic nutrition knowledge (e.g., difference between carbohydrate, fat and protein) and limited ability to count calories
- High no-show rate among individuals registered for the classes. Numerous barriers to participation were identified through informal surveying of patients and primarily included: transportation; child and family care/responsibilities; and work conflicts. Co-pays and lack of motivation were not identified as barriers.
- Five weeks is not enough for most individuals to improve their health through weight loss; however, individuals are allowed to join the class as many times as they wish

Future Directions

- We plan to continue offering the groups and to establish a group of 10-12 active participants in each group by registering a greater number of patients for each group
- We hope to offer a once a separate monthly for patients not able to attend a 5 week class or for those interested in a less intensive program

* Acknowledgements: We are grateful to the Denver Health Foundation and the Denver Health Department of Managed Care for providing pedometers to our patients.

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