

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Why lose weight? Reasons for seeking weight loss by overweight but otherwise healthy men

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OBJECTIVE: To identify the reasons for seeking weight loss in overweight or obese but otherwise healthy men.

DESIGN: Interviews, prior to intervention, with subjects who had volunteered to participate in a work-site-based weight loss study.

SUBJECTS: Ninety-one overweight/obese male workers. Mean age 41, range 18–55 y, mean body mass index (BMI) 31.0, range 26.2–41.6 kg/m².

MEASUREMENTS: Anthropometric measurements; body weight and height. Body mass index calculated. A short interview using open questions to determine the individuals reason for seeking weight loss.

RESULTS: The message that weight loss is beneficial to health for the overweight was recognized by all subjects regardless of BMI, and was reported as the main factor for attempting weight loss. Improved fitness and effects on appearance and well-being were reported half as often as the primary reason for weight loss.

CONCLUSION: Overweight lay members of the public have accepted the health education message that weight loss can improve health. Overweight but otherwise healthy men who responded, of their own accord, to an electronic mail message offering help to lose weight did not regard obesity and overweight as primarily a cosmetic issue. This is still, however, important, especially to younger people.

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Keywords: intentional weight loss; overweight; reasons

Introduction

The prevalence of obesity has now reached epidemic proportions for both men and women in many industrialized populations.¹ An extensive literature exists on the effectiveness of interventions to achieve and maintain weight loss, but information on the reasons why individuals elect to try and lose weight is more limited, particularly amongst men. Successful weight loss depends on many factors, however many dieters are most successful when they have access to continued support.² For that support to be effective it is important to understand the motivating factors behind an individual's desire to lose weight. A clearer understanding of the reasons motivating weight loss should help the development of strategies to combat the increasing incidence of overweight and obesity.

Methods

Reasons for attempting weight loss were recorded for 91 male subjects who volunteered to participate in a work-site weight management programme by responding to an electronic mail message offering help (Appendix 1). During a short interview, prior to receiving dietary advice, all subjects were asked, 'why do you want to lose weight?' Individuals were prompted for further reasons, until no more were given. All responses were documented, categorized by the terms used and ranked in order of importance. Reasons for weight loss were described for the group as a whole, according to body mass index (BMI) cut-offs (25.0–29.9, 30.0–39.9 and ≥ 40 kg/m²) and by age bands (18–29, 30–39 and 40–55 y).

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Forth Valley Health Board ethics committee.

Results

The mean age of participants was 41 y, range 18–55, mean BMI 31.0, s.d. 3.7, range 26.2–41.6 kg/m². The message that weight loss was beneficial to health was recognized by all

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subjects and reported as the main factor for attempting weight loss regardless of BMI (Figure 1). Other factors, of which improved fitness, effects on appearance and well-being were most common, were reported half as frequently as the primary motivating factor. Men aged 30–40 y considered improved appearance the primary reason for weight loss, while those in the younger age group (18–29 y) ranked this second in importance to improving fitness (Figure 2a). These lifestyle factors were less important to men in the oldest age band (40–55 y), who considered health benefits to be of primary importance.

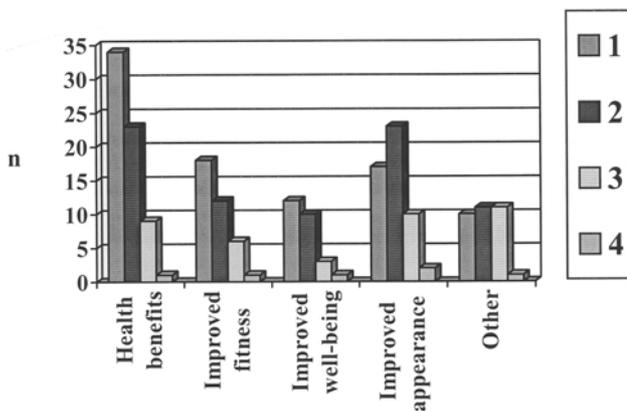


Figure 1 Reasons for seeking weight loss (all subjects); $n = 91$, 1 = most important reason, followed by 2nd, 3rd and 4th in importance.

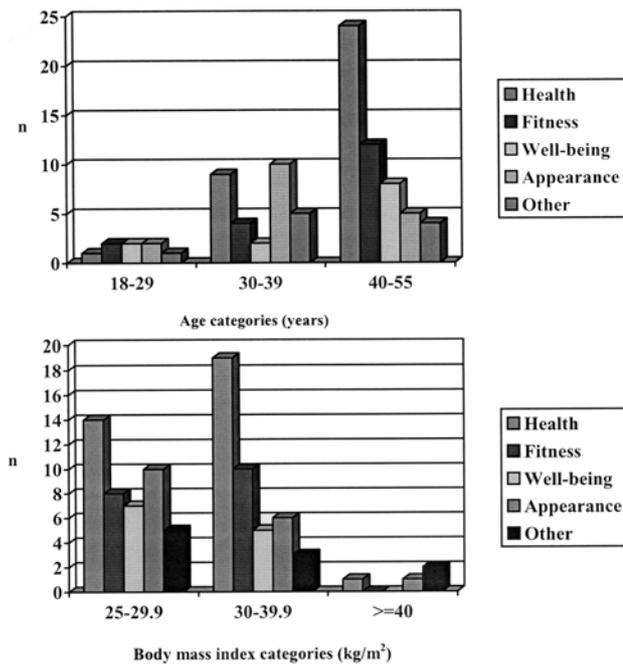


Figure 2 (a) The most important reason for weight loss by age; (b) The most important reasons for weight loss by body mass index.

Subjects with a BMI of 26–30 or greater than 40 kg/m² ranked improving appearance second in importance to health, while subjects with BMI 30–40 kg/m² ranked fitness second in importance (Figure 2b). Improving fitness was not reported as a reason for weight loss in the most overweight group.

Thirty-three people gave a number of other reasons for weight loss and in 10 cases this was the primary reason for weight loss. In seven cases the main reason for attempting weight loss was ‘clothes not fitting’ and for the remaining three increasing age was the motivating factor.

Discussion

The message that weight loss has positive health benefits appears to have been accepted by the male lay members of the public in the current study. It has been suggested that the reasons for weight loss differ between the sexes as it has been previously shown that men more often than women report a health issue as a trigger for weight loss.³ However, studies^{4–6} carried out in both men and women also reported that health reasons were most frequently cited as the motivating factor for attempting weight loss. Two of these studies^{5,6} were carried out in those already in the health care system and themselves classified as patients. In one study carried out only in women,⁷ physical unattractiveness was reported to be the principal concern before health issues. However this study was carried out in 1984, before the prevalence of obesity and overweight had reached its current levels and the findings may reflect the ignorance regarding the effects of overweight on health at that time.

Our results do suggest that the motivating factors for weight loss differ with age. The cosmetic aspects of overweight were important to younger men, health benefits only assuming greater importance with age. This is in agreement with the findings of a survey of young North American students attending High School⁸ who all reported that appearance was the most important reason motivating them to want to reduce weight.

Improving physical fitness was not perceived as an important goal for the morbidly obese, and perhaps this is because they regard becoming more physically active an unattainable goal. Many campaigns encourage individuals to become more physically active, as an adjunct to weight loss. However, the present results suggest that this advice may not be seen as relevant to this group. ‘Messages to patients must be appropriately tailored and packaged in terms of the patients’ beliefs, understanding and agendas’.⁶

Aside from the health effects of obesity, it has been suggested⁹ that motivating factors, ultimately the reasons for an individual to want to lose weight, differ between those who are successful at weight loss and those who are not. Successful dieters were motivated by psychological factors relating to confidence rather than health and symptoms relief.⁹ The role of weight loss in improving self-esteem was also reported by a North American study of successful weight

losers who were able to maintain their weight losses for at least 1 y.⁵

Given the epidemic of obesity, and the need to encourage weight management, this study provides information that will be of use to those encouraging the lay population to lose weight.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Electronic mail message circulated to all employees inviting participation in the weight loss study

Weight loss at work *needs you!*

Thinking of those summer holidays

Long lazy days on the beach or sipping cocktails
by the pool

Why not let us help you enjoy it even more!

Weight loss at work can help you lose those extra inches!

In conjunction with the University of Glasgow Department of Human Nutrition's research study Occupational Health want to improve the general health of BP employees.

120 recruits needed, so please volunteer to help us to help you!

This service offers nutritional expertise and counselling to those who would like to shed those extra pounds.

Contact us **NOW** by e-mail at **Weight Loss at Work**.