

Paper: Exploring the feasibility and acceptability of using Internet technology to promote physical activity within a defined community

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As internet and email use becomes more widespread in the general community there is the potential for considerable public health impact. Using such electronic media public health professionals may deliver individually relevant programs (flexible and convenient) to a large volume of participants at a realistic cost. Previous research in the area has found varying degrees of support for internet-based physical activity programs; while some studies show significant short-term effects, others report difficulties engaging and retaining participants. The present study examined the wider reach and appeal of the internet for physical activity health promotion.

Marshall, Eakin, Leslie & Owen (2005) conducted an internet based survey canvassing individual preferences for sources of assistance, help or advice on how to be more physically active. A total of 9000 Internet service provider (ISP) clients were invited to participate in the survey via an ISP electronic newsletter, followed by a direct email within a 12 day period. An incentive of entry into a draw to win a 12-month ISP dial-up subscription was offered for completion of the survey by a specified date.

The survey yielded a low response, estimated at only 9% [46 newsletter respondents, and 774 email respondents]. While the response rate may have been higher, even potentially doubled (previous studies have found some 50% of ISP email accounts inactive) even 18% response would be low, particularly considering potential participants were already internet/email users and a tangible incentive was offered.

The respondents were a highly selected group; just over half were male (55%), 57% worked fulltime, 56% were over 45 years old and 42% were tertiary educated. Fifty eight per cent of respondents reported setting aside time during the day for physical activity.

This research is important in terms of its survey methods, as well as its physical activity advice preference findings. The most striking results include the poor survey response, and the relatively low preference for internet/email physical activity advice [16% & 19% respectively, compared with 47% preferring participation with a group and 42% preferring advice from a GP/health professional]. This is particularly informative when one considers participants were a highly selected and motivated sample of internet subscribers, they were recruited through an internet service provider and were required to 'opt in' to the research. In this light, the participation rate and preferences observed in the survey represent a best case scenario for new communication technologies.

The health promotion utility of internet technology is still questionable, and this study suggests that email and internet based interventions should not become the panacea for physical activity health promotion. Currently, such interventions may struggle to effectively engage participants, and may neglect the needs of high risk populations. As internet use becomes more prevalent in the general community there is potential for improvements in its reach and appeal, thus public health professionals may re-assess its health promotion utility in the future.