How Do Nutrition and Physical Activity Fit Together?

The prevalence of chronic diseases continues to be a major health concern for Canadians, with heart disease, cancer, obesity, hypertension, and diabetes affecting a significant part of the population. These diseases have subsequent negative effects on quality of life, health care requirements, productivity, and financial status, and are all strongly associated with lifestyle factors. Dietary and exercise habits are important in preventing and/or treating these diseases.

Most major health organizations recognize the combination of healthy eating and active living as the key non-pharmacologic health promotion strategy for individuals, communities, and populations (these organizations include the Heart and Stroke Foundation and its affiliated organizations (Laboratory Centre for Disease Control et al., 2000); Cancer Bureau, Health Protection Branch (Health Canada, Health Protection Branch—Laboratory Centre for Disease Control, 1999); Obesity Canada (Lau, 1999); National Hypertension Control Strategy Committee (Joffres et al., 1997); and Canadian Diabetes Association (Canadian Diabetes Association, 1999, 2000; Pan et al., 1997)).

Other government-sponsored health agencies share this dual emphasis. Health Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating (Health Canada, 1992) and the Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living (Health Canada & Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, 1998) are intended to be used together to promote healthy lifestyles.

One Approach

People are more likely to internalize repeated, consistent, and positive messages about healthy eating and active living. Our overall research goal is to implement multifaceted approaches to increase awareness, understanding, and positive behaviors related to nutrition and physical activity. For example, we currently provide workshops for health professionals so that they can improve their self-efficacy in promoting healthy eating and active living. We chose health professionals because they are on the “front line”—they meet the general public and are recognized as knowledgeable about health and wellness.

For this first research project, our target group of health professionals included registered dietitians. Dietitians are highly skilled in helping people adopt healthy eating behaviors. Because of the link between diet and disease prevention and treatment, dietitians can provide leadership in promoting the healthy eating and active living message. In fact, people may believe that dietitians generally recommend strategies for increasing physical activity, as well as dietary advice. However, dietitians may not have enough experience in the exercise sciences to comfortably counsel clients on active living strategies. This gap may undermine dietitians’ effectiveness in supporting clients to reduce their risk of chronic disease and to improve their health outcomes.

Project Design

The project included three phases.

- Focus groups: Nutrition professionals identified gaps in their active living/physical activity knowledge or training.
- Workshops: We developed a workshop for dietitians on active living counselling and conducted these workshops throughout Alberta.
- Evaluation: We evaluated workshop participant satisfaction and whether participants applied targeted skills to their own practice (program evaluation will also measure client impact) This framework has been used successfully to develop and evaluate continuing education programs for dietitians in other areas (Lorenz et al., 2000).

Focus Group Results

We used focus groups throughout Alberta to assess the perceived needs of dietitians. Focus groups ranged from four to eleven participants, and included registered dietitians who currently or who planned to include lifestyle counselling in their practice. We used purposeful sampling (Walker, 1985) to invite participants with specific characteristics, experiences, behaviors, and/or interests (and clientele) in areas such as weight management, diabetes education, cardiac rehabilitation, or wellness programs.

Focus group results revealed that dietitians were enthusiastic about promoting active living and that they would like greater collaboration with physical activity professionals. Dietitians also were specific about their need for knowledge, resources, and skills in exercise science. We used results from the focus groups to modify the workshop to include issues relevant to...
Promoting Active Living within a Dietitian's Practice

The workshop’s overall objective was to improve the efficacy of Alberta dietitians in physical activity counselling. The key educational tool was Canada’s Physical Activity Guide for Healthy Active Living (a similar workshop for exercise professionals would use Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating). We modelled the workshop after programs from the Cooper Institute (Dallas, TX) (www.cooperinst.org) and the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (CAHPERD) (www.caahperd.ca). These programs and our workshop use the transtheoretical model of behaviour change. Partners in the workshop included the University of Alberta’s Department of Agricultural Food and Nutritional Science and Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, and the provincial Be Fit for Life Network.

Workshop Content

The workshop content included three main sections: knowledge, skill development, and evaluation.

- Knowledge component: This section included basic active living and physical activity information (including a review of physical activity and its health-related implications and Canada’s Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living), ways to monitor activity, misconceptions about physical activity, and basic principles of the transtheoretical model of behaviour change.
- Skill development and counselling practice: This component included designing curriculum and educational materials for active living, identifying resources for supporting active living, combining healthy eating and active living concepts and messages, leading group sessions, and dealing with difficult clients.
- Evaluation: This component included tracking and evaluating personal and client practices.

We held workshops in Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat, and Grande Prairie (attended by 110 participants). Participants rated overall satisfaction with the workshop as very good. We are currently analysing the questionnaires completed before and after the workshops.

For more information about this project, contact Linda McCargar at linda.mccargar@ualberta.ca. The authors gratefully acknowledge the Danone Institute of Canada for funding this research. We would also like to thank Dr. Kim Raine and Dr. Marie-Claude Paquette for assistance with focus group methodology.

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References