

Testing the short-term effectiveness of Online Weight loss programmes

Plain English summary

What was the research question

Three-quarters of adults living with obesity are trying to lose weight. Most people do this alone, without formal support. Research has shown that this is usually less successful than when people take part in a structured programme.

Weight-loss programmes vary a great deal. Programmes offered in the community used to be mostly face-to-face sessions, individually or in groups. But nowadays there are also programmes where support is provided mostly through a website, or with an app. Some programmes also involve personal coaching but are more expensive. However, some digital programmes are cheaper to run than face-to-face sessions and might be preferred by some people as they can be more flexible to meet individual needs.

In this study – Online Weight Loss -, we wanted to find out whether very light touch digital weight loss

programmes are effective in helping people to lose weight.

What we did to find the answer

GPs sent letters to people aged 18 years and over, with a body mass index of 30 kg/m² to ask if they wanted support to try to lose weight. People who said yes were allocated by chance (randomised) to one of three online weight loss programmes for 8 weeks or to a group who received no support. This last group is important so that we can compare what happens when people try to lose weight on their own, and measure how much additional benefit – if any – comes from taking part in a structured programme.

We studied the average change in weight in each group 8 weeks after the start. We also calculated how many people in each group lost at least 5% of their initial weight.

Reference

Noreik, M, Madigan, CD, Astbury, NM, et al. Testing the short-term effectiveness of primary care referral to online weight loss programmes: A randomised controlled trial. Clin Obes. 2021; 11(6):e12482. doi:10.1111/cob.12482



What we found

528 people started the study and 87% reported their weight at the beginning and end.

In 8 weeks, people who were offered the Rosemary Online programme lost 2.3kg (5lbs). This was 1.5kg (3.3lbs) more weight on average than people receiving no support. People offered Slimming World online or who were encouraged to use the free NHS programme lost 1.7kg (3.7lbs) and 1.3kg (2.9lbs), but this was not significantly more than people trying to lose weight on their own.

People were more than three times more likely to lose 5% of their weight in the Rosemary Online group and more than twice as likely in the Slimming World group than the people not offered a specific programme.

What this means

On average, people who set out to lose weight are able to lose small amounts of weight. But only one of three online weight loss programmes was better than trying to lose weight unaided. This may be because the programmes we tested were so light touch they only added marginally to people's own weight-loss attempts and some were no better at all.

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It's important to note that all the programmes tested here have been updated since the study ended. The pace of change in the digital market is very fast with new programmes continually being launched or new features added to existing programmes.

Being realistic, it will not be possible to test every weight loss programme before roll-out, but these programmes need to be strongly based on previous evidence of what works to stand the best chance of success. Ongoing monitoring is also essential so that services that do not work can be enhanced or ceased.