

Communication Technologies and Maternal Interest in Health-Promotion Information about Postpartum Weight and Parenting Practices

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To describe postpartum women's access, perceived skill, confidence, and use of Internet and mobile technologies; their views about receiving health information about postpartum weight and parenting; and whether these factors varied by race/ethnicity or income level.

Design: Health survey of a stratified random sample.

Setting: County in central Texas.

Participants: One hundred forty-five (145) White/Anglo, African American, or Hispanic women of higher and lower income.

Results: Overall, 122 (84.1%) of respondents had access to a computer with an Internet connection at home and made daily use of the following: the Internet 77.6%, e-mail 75.4%, cell phone 97.1%, and text messaging 66.7%. Significant racial/ethnic and income differences occurred in home Internet access, frequency of Internet and e-mail use, and perceived confidence or skill favoring White/Anglo women over ethnic minority women, and those of higher over lower income. Overall, 35.9% of women expressed "a lot" of interest in an Internet-based weight loss program, 38.9% in a weight loss program sent by mail, 44.8% in an Internet-based parenting advice, and 38.6% in parenting advice sent by mail. Women of higher and lower income differed significantly in their interest in three of the four types of health-promotion information and methods of delivery.

Conclusion: Generally, women with lower income were more likely to express high interest in receiving health information related to parenting by mail than those of higher incomes, whereas women of higher incomes were more likely to express high interest in receiving weight loss and parenting information through the Internet.

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The first postpartum year is a key opportunity to promote the health of mothers and infants. Mothers are making multiple transitions in personal habits, relationships, and family routines (Martell, 2001; Nelson, 2003; O'Reilly, 2004), while infants are in a foundational period of growth and development (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). Internet and mobile technologies offer new and unprecedented opportunities to expand how health-promotion information is conveyed to new mothers to improve their lives and those of their infants. To situate the study of communication technologies during this dynamic period, we focused on two areas of importance to maternal and infant health promotion: managing postpartum weight and early parent-

ing practices. Being overweight or failing to lose excessive weight gained during pregnancy may have adverse effects on women's future health (Field et al., 2001; Willett et al., 1995). In turn, positive or negative early parenting practices may promote or inhibit the growth, development, and health of young children (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 1998, 2005a, 2005b; Green & Palfrey, 2002).

"Empowering people to make healthy choices" is a key part of the National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy (National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council, 2011) and is particularly relevant to choices of new mothers in areas such as weight management and

parenting practices. In support of the strategy, Internet and mobile technologies may enable health care and public health agencies to convey health-promotion information to new mothers in ways beyond traditional methods. For example, the Internet website Dear Abby—Healthy Moms Advice Kit provides mothers with a range of brief health-related information (Food and Drug Administration and Federal Citizen Information Center, n.d.). Similarly, Text4Baby is a text-messaging program providing health information to pregnant women (Jordan, Ray, Johnson, & Evans, 2011). However, ethnic minority and low-income mothers of young children may face barriers in regard to skill, confidence, and access to Internet or related technologies that limit their ability to access and receive health information (Jansen, 2010; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010, 2011). Moreover, most surveys exploring parents' health-related Internet use (Carroll et al., 2005; Goldman & Macpherson, 2006; Tuffrey & Finlay, 2002) do not specifically focus on mothers of infants, nor are the effects of race/ethnicity, income, or social cognitive factors on Internet or mobile technology use examined among new mothers. Thus, we sought to expand understanding of communication technology use pertaining to health-promotion programming related to maternal weight and parenting practices in the first postpartum year.

Background

Technology Access and Use for Health Information

National surveys of the general population indicate that access to the Internet is widespread in the United States (Jansen, 2010; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010; 2011). In a 2009 survey of about 54,000 households, 64% used home broadband connections to access the Internet, 5% used home dial-up connections, 8% accessed the Internet at nonhome locations, and 23% did not use the Internet (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010). By 2010, the number of households with home broadband connections increased to 68.2% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). At the same time, cell phone ownership among U.S. adults reached 83%, and 73% reported using their cell phones for text messaging (Smith, 2011). However, Internet use, access to broadband Internet connections at home, and cell phone ownership all varied widely based on income (Jansen; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). Income gaps were greatest for home broadband Internet access, with only 40% of households with incomes below \$30,000 having broadband home access compared to 87% with

incomes of \$75,000 or above (Jansen). Similar gaps in home broadband access persist between White households (68%) in the United States and African American (50%) or Hispanic households (45%) (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). Cell phone usage, however, is one area that reflects a recent trend in the opposite direction with African American and Hispanic adults more likely (87%) to own a cell phone than White adults (80%) (Smith, 2010). Ethnic minority adults are also more likely to use text messaging than White adults (Smith, 2011).

A limitation of national surveys of Internet use for purposes of health information, such as the Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS; National Cancer Institute, n.d.a), is not distinguishing how adult use may vary based on age of children. For example, the most recent HINTS asked only how many children in the home were younger than age 18 years (National Cancer Institute, n.d.b) and thus provided limited generalizability to mothers of infants 0 to 1 years of age. Similarly, studies focused on parents' health-related Internet and technology use or preferences, except for those of Carolan (2007) and Phelan et al. (2010), encompass a broad range of children's ages (Carroll et al., 2005; Goldman & Macpherson, 2006; Tuffrey & Finlay, 2002). Furthermore, these studies typically are bound to a specific health care system or include convenience samples thereby limiting generalizability (Goldman & Macpherson; Phelan et al.; Tuffrey & Finlay). Still, parental surveys indicate that income was associated with "comfort" with and frequency of Internet use (Carroll et al.). Further research would contribute to better understanding how communication technologies may be used to improve the health of new mothers and infants during the formative months after birth.

Maternal Weight as a Postpartum Health Concern

Obesity is a national concern because of multiple negative effects on health. Based on a study of more than 800,000 women, the body mass index (BMI) range of 20.0 to 24.9 was associated with the lowest all-cause mortality in general compared to higher BMIs (Berrington de Gonzalez et al., 2010). These findings underscore those of key epidemiological studies showing that weights classified as overweight (BMI $\geq$ 25 to 29.9) or obese (BMI $\geq$ 30) are both associated with chronic disease morbidity. In the landmark Nurses Health Study, Field et al. (2001) found that among 77,690 women, overweight and obese status were associated with increased incidence of diabetes,

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