

Nutrition Information to the Desktop: A Pilot Online Nutrition Course on Saturated Fat for Public Librarians Increases Knowledge, Expectancies, and Self-efficacy

Gabrielle M. Turner-McGrievy, MS, RD; Marci K. Campbell, PhD, MPH, RD

ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess the effectiveness of an online course for public librarians on helping patrons reduce saturated fat.

Design: Pre- and posttest design along with a 6-month follow-up survey.

Setting: Online nutrition course.

Participants: 100 (8 males, 92 females) completed the course, and 29 completed the follow-up survey.

Intervention: Completion of an online course.

Main Outcome Measures: Self-efficacy, expectancies, and knowledge were assessed at pre- and posttest. Self-efficacy, expectancies, and use of course content were assessed at 6-month follow-up.

Analysis: Paired-samples *t* tests.

Results: Knowledge increased significantly ($P < .001$). Self-efficacy significantly ($P < .001$) increased from the pre- to posttest, and this increase remained significant at the 6-month follow-up as compared to pretest ($P < .001$). Expectancies also increased significantly from pre- to posttest ($P < .001$) and remained high at 6 months, but they were not significantly different from baseline ($P = .178$). At 6-month follow-up, 39% of the participants had used the information from the course to find resources for a patron with a health-related question, and 82% had used the information from the course to help a friend or family member.

Conclusions and Implications: This small pilot study with librarians shows that an online course can be an effective way to increase self-efficacy about helping patrons with nutrition-related questions.

Key Words: Internet, distance education, dietary fats, public libraries (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2009;41:188-193.)

INTRODUCTION

Many Americans feel that they are unsure as to how to make healthful improvements to their diets and are increasingly turning to their public libraries for information to assist them.¹ This may be particularly true for Americans who do not have access to the Internet at home or do not have the financial resources to hire a regis-

tered dietitian (RD) or purchase health-related books.

Public libraries can play an important role in reducing health disparities and promoting health in communities. A panel of community-based organizations was convened by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) to determine the possible role that libraries can play in community health. Community organizations reported there was a definite need for libraries

to teach and promote health. The organizations also stressed a need for public librarians to conduct community outreach through program planning. Because libraries often serve underserved and minority populations, the panel agreed that libraries could help to reduce health disparities by improving the health decision making of their patrons.² Indeed, because of these issues of health disparities, the NLM has created a Strategic Plan for Addressing Health Disparities 2004–2008. This plan centers on the idea that some of the challenges facing the reduction of health disparities could be addressed through improving access to affordable and user-friendly health information.³

In 1998, the NLM undertook a pilot project to assess the role of public libraries in providing health information to patrons. This study found that patrons ranked health-related issues in their top 10 list of requested library topics.⁴ The study concluded

School of Public Health, Nutrition Department, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC

The authors would like to thank the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg University Health Scholars program for financial support of this study. The authors would also like to thank the University of North Texas's Library Education at the Desktop for their assistance with course development and distribution.

Address for correspondence: Gabrielle M. Turner-McGrievy, MS, RD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Public Health, 2217 McGavran-Greenberg, CB# 7461, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7461; Phone: (919) 260-1032; Fax: (919) 843-3639; E-mail: brie@unc.edu

©2009 SOCIETY FOR NUTRITION EDUCATION
doi:10.1016/j.jneb.2007.11.006

with several recommendations. The top 2 are as follows:

- offer health information training for public librarians ... on a regional, rotating basis as part of consumer health information outreach.
- provide a Web-based “train-the-trainer” course for public librarians that in turn could be used by public libraries to offer a “consumer-oriented medical reference course” as part of their own patron training.

Training public librarians to feel confident in providing health information to patrons may be one way to improve the health of patrons using community libraries. Research shows that librarians would like more training in the area of finding health-related information for patrons.⁵

The objective of this study was to assess the effectiveness of an online course for public librarians, which taught them how to help patrons find health-related resources for patrons seeking information about decreasing saturated fat intake. The goal of the course was to increase health knowledge, provide program planning ideas on helping patrons to decrease dietary saturated fat, and use Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)⁶ to increase self-efficacy and expectancies related to helping patrons with nutrition questions. Social Cognitive Theory is a framework that helps to predict and understand behavior change.⁶ In the present study, SCT was used to design the course and to develop constructs to evaluate it. The course aimed to increase public librarians’ knowledge about and resources on reducing saturated fat in the diet to be better able to answer patron questions about saturated fat and health. The course also provided ideas for program planning. Program planning is a part of many public libraries and involves planning lectures, seminars, displays, and other activities to encourage the community to use the library.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION

An online course was designed to teach public librarians about provid-

ing patrons with resources on decreasing dietary saturated fat. The study was funded by the Health Scholars Program of the Meatless Monday campaign,⁷ which has the aim of decreasing the saturated fat intake of American adults and children. Table 1 outlines the course content and participant flow through the course. This course consisted of a pretest and a video scenario of a patron asking a librarian questions about saturated fat, to which the librarian did not have answers. The participants then went through the 6 sections: (1) introduction, (2) overview of saturated fat, (3) role of fat in health, (4) resources on reducing fat intake for your patrons, (5) program planning for your patrons (eg, the course discussed bringing in an RD during National Nutrition Month to host a talk on low-fat eating), and (6) conclusion. Participants then watched a video scenario of the same patron returning to the public librarian, who now felt confident about helping the patron with his saturated fat-related questions. Finally, the participants completed a posttest. To provide a basic overview of the role saturated fat plays in health, librarians were presented with nutrition information about saturated fats. The purpose of the course was not to train librarians to provide health information. The main focus of the course was to help librarians learn about locating health-related resources for patrons and provide ideas for health-related program planning. The course was self-paced and could generally be completed within 2 hours. This study was approved by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Public Health Institutional Review Board, and all participants completed consent forms.

Participants were recruited through the LE@D program (formerly Library Education @ the Desktop, now Lifetime Education @ the Desktop).⁸ The LE@D program provides online course modules to librarians and library staff for professional development and continuing education. There is a variety of continuing education topics available on the LE@D Web site. The saturated fat course was the only course available that dealt with a health-related topic. Participants either registered for the

course themselves or were registered by their library director as part of staff training and were eligible to participate if they worked for a library as either a librarian or library paraprofessional. Participants who registered for the course were informed about the study and asked to complete a consent form if they wanted to participate. One-hundred and two public librarians and library paraprofessionals at 6 different library branches in Texas and Alabama registered for the pilot test of this online course.

A description of how SCT was used in the course can be found in Table 2. The course used a combination of constructs from SCT to increase self-efficacy (confidence in helping patrons). Video scenarios of patron interactions were used to provide observational learning and to improve outcome expectations (what participants expected to happen when they worked with patrons). Written text on the value of decreasing saturated fat was used to increase expectancies (the value they placed on helping patrons with nutrition issues). Information on types of program planning and useful resources related to saturated fat was used to increase behavioral capability (knowledge and ability to help patrons). There was also a flash animation tutorial that took librarians through how to do a Medline search. The course contained a variety of colorful, engaging graphics. All course content was used to improve knowledge about helping patrons with questions related to saturated fat.

Before starting the course, participants took a pretest, which assessed knowledge about diseases related to excess saturated fat intake, reducing saturated fat resources, and nutrition program planning ideas (16 questions total). This test also had a question to assess self-efficacy and a question to assess expectancies. Self-efficacy was assessed by using a scale of 1 to 7 (1 = not confident, 7 = very confident) by asking, “How confident are you in your ability to help patrons with questions about nutrition and fat intake?” Expectancies were also assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely) by asking, “How much do you agree with this

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