Systematic Review: An Evaluation of Major Commercial Weight Loss Programs in the United States

Abstract

Background: Each year millions of Americans enroll in commercial and self-help weight loss programs. Health care providers and their obese patients know little about these programs because of the absence of systematic reviews.

Purpose: To describe the components, costs, and efficacy of the major commercial and organized self-help weight loss programs in the United States that provide structured in-person or online counseling.

Data Sources: Review of company Web sites, telephone discussion with company representatives, and search of the MEDLINE database.

Study Selection: Randomized trials at least 12 weeks in duration that enrolled only adults and assessed interventions as they are usually provided to the public, or case series that met these criteria, stated the number of enrollees, and included a follow-up evaluation that lasted 1 year or longer.

Data Extraction: Data were extracted on study design, attrition, weight loss, duration of follow-up, and maintenance of weight loss.

Data Synthesis: We found studies of eDiets.com, Health Management Resources, Take Off Pounds Sensibly, OPTIFAST, and Weight Watchers. Of 3 randomized, controlled trials of Weight Watchers, the largest reported a loss of 3.2% of initial weight at 2 years. One randomized trial and several case series of medically supervised very-low-calorie diet programs found that patients who completed treatment lost approximately 15% to 25% of initial weight. These programs were associated with high costs, high attrition rates, and a high probability of regaining 50% or more of lost weight in 1 to 2 years. Commercial interventions available over the Internet and organized self-help programs produced minimal weight loss.

Limitations: Because many studies did not control for high attrition rates, the reported results are probably a best-case scenario.

Conclusions: With the exception of 1 trial of Weight Watchers, the evidence to support the use of the major commercial and self-help weight loss programs is suboptimal. Controlled trials are needed to assess the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of these interventions.
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