

African American Families Participate Together for a Healthier Lifestyle

BY: ISABEL POSADA

Kassandra Alia, doctoral student in the Clinical-Communities Program in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Carolina (USC) is the Project Director for the Families Improving Together (FIT) project.

The FIT project is supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), led by Dr. Dawn Wilson, professor of Psychology at USC and affiliated scholar of the Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities.

Project FIT is a research study designed to improve communication among African American families to help prevent chronic diseases, like Type II diabetes.

National research statistics indicate that overweight and obesity rates are high across the board, especially among African-American adolescents. Specifically, 41% of African-American children ages 12-19-years-old were above the 85th percentile for weight, which classifies them as overweight.¹ The rates for Non-Hispanic White children in the same category is 30%.¹ Therefore, African American adolescents are at a disproportionate risk for chronic diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes, and stroke.

Alia says the idea of the project is to influence teens while they are young and still learning to develop these healthy lifestyle skills in conjunction with their parents and families to hopefully decrease rates of obesity among this population and promote a healthy long-term life.

In phase 1 of the study, participants will be randomized into one of two groups- a motivational plus family-based weight loss intervention or a basic health education program. The goal of this phase of the study will be to compare group differences on reducing participants' weight and improving diet and physical activity.

In Phase 2 of the study, participants will be assigned to either a tailored on-line intervention or a health education control on-line program to test the added dose of the online program on weight loss, diet, and physical activity outcomes. After 6-months, there will be a follow-up assessment to examine maintenance of weight loss. ²

A novel piece of the study is that it combines a group-based approach with a follow-up online approach to increase the likelihood that families will stay enrolled in the program and succeed at losing weight.

"It's challenging, but also rewarding to be able to work directly with the families. For example, one adolescent participant was initially a little hesitant about the process, and she said, 'Can you believe I've lost three pounds!' Hearing that just made my day. Seeing the impact that this program is making is so rewarding," Alia said.

Key Points

- Research has shown high rates of obesity and chronic diseases among African Americans.
- USC researchers are testing an obesity intervention program for African American families to participate together to lose weight.
- If the study is effective, the program could help future families prevent chronic disease.

The project's long-term goal is to help understand if this is an effective approach for reducing weight status and improving healthy behaviors, such as physical activity and fruit and vegetable intake in African American families, and if using this approach on a broader level would help future families.

More information is also available at www.fitusc.org.

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1. Flegal, K. M., Carroll, M. D., Ogden, C. L., & Johnson, C. L. (2002). Prevalence and trends in obesity among US adults, 1999-2000. *JAMA*, 288(14), 1723-1727.
 2. <https://sites.google.com/site/dkwilsonusc/project-summaries>