

# R U FIT? Quirky, Random Factoids About Health, Diet Reach Teens

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Jan 14, 2013

TUCSON, Arizona— New research suggests that text messaging might provide an opportunity to reach adolescents and provide tips on healthy eating and physical activity [1]. SMS messages helped to engage adolescents about diet and exercise and provided information that was "appealing, relevant, and practical for teens to implement," say the researchers.

"The current study's findings suggest these messages should be positive, simple, few in number, and designed to be culturally appropriate for different adolescent subpopulations," write **Dr Melanie Hingle** (University of Arizona, Tucson) and colleagues in the January/February 2013 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

In a podcast accompanying the journal report, Hingle told **Dr Karen Chapman-Novakofski** (University of Illinois, Urbana), the editor-in-chief of the journal, that the participatory text-messaging model is essentially a product, one developed with the feedback of teenagers, that she hopes her "target audience" will use and incorporate into their lives.

"The participatory part of the R&D process is not really optional," said Hingle. "It's a necessity, particularly for adolescents where they are at an age where they are making more and more decisions on their own with regard to all types of behaviors, health behaviors included. The materials we developed have to resonate with them, be meaningful to them, be interesting to them, or they won't use them."

Working with 177 teens over a one-year period, the researchers explored the teenagers' preference for message content, style, format, frequency, and mode of delivery. They ultimately developed random factoid-style messages that were 160 characters or less, delivered no more than two times per day. For example, one factoid might state that a can of soda has 10 teaspoons of added sugar, that the average teen drinks one glass of milk but two sodas per day, or that whole grains keep one fuller longer. Other messages focused on the importance of sleep and risk factors for diabetes, such as obesity. Teens also preferred the term *physical activity* to *exercise*, stating the latter was too regimented and not fun.

Hingle noted that SMS messaging doesn't require a smart phone with internet access, which will hopefully make the health and nutritional messages available to a more widespread audience.

"I think what we observed here is that the standard health information message and delivery method are not that appealing to youth," said Hingle. Instead, random messages shaped with a sense of fun, rather than didactic, instructional facts, appeared to be what was most enjoyed and read. "We thought of the random messages as the little bit of sugar that makes the medicine go down," said Hingle.

The researchers are currently conducting a pilot study testing the application in 150 adolescents to determine whether the factoids alter behavior and eating habits. They have also applied what they have learned about SMS to other areas, such as providing information to Arizona teens about the importance of screening for skin cancer and protecting oneself from the sun.

## References

1. Hingle M, Nichter M, Medeiros M, Grace S. Texting for health: The use of participatory methods to develop healthy lifestyle messages for teens. *J Nutr Educ Behav* 2013; 45:12-19. [Abstract](#)

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Cite this article: R U FIT? Quirky, Random Factoids About Health, Diet Reach Teens. *Medscape*. Jan 14, 2013.