



Log on to take it off

Weigh the pros and cons of weight-loss sites on the Web. **BY Hope S. Warshaw, R.D., CDE**

Angela Thiery's advice from her doctor was simple, but not exactly helpful: Lose weight. The 30-year-old was 50 pounds overweight with insulin resistance and a family history of type 2 diabetes. As a single mother, Angela was short on time, so she turned to

the all-hours convenience of the Web. "Discovering the online weight-control site *ediets.com* was a dream come true," she says. Angela has lost and kept off the 50 pounds and continues to stay connected to the site because, she says, it's a lifeline to maintaining her new weight.

EDiets is among a wave of weight-loss Web sites. But are these easy-access plans as effective as in-person programs or going it alone?

Testing the claims

The promises made by weight-loss Web sites have spurred researchers—including Jean Harvey-Berino, Ph.D., R.D., chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences at the University of Vermont and founder of the Vtrim Weight Management Program (uvm.edu/vtrim)—to study their effectiveness. Harvey-Berino's conclusion: "Internet programs can be as effective as in-person programs both for encouraging initial weight loss as well as long-term weight maintenance."

Participants in Vtrim, her online weight-loss study, lost an average of 21 pounds in 6 months. Harvey-Berino says part of that can be attributed to the social support (online members contacting one another) that's important in weight control.

The online medium provides "pluses that suit time-strapped and convenience-prone people—from low cost to 24/7 access, no travel time, and more," says Susan Burke, R.D., CDE, author of *Naturally Thin* (Mansion Grove House, 2008). Harvey-Berino also cites the economic advantages of free and subscription online programs. "Many people don't have access to high-quality in-person weight-loss programs," she says.

Maximizing support

Studies in both diabetes and weight

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Does the site customize the program to fit your needs? “One size fits all” doesn’t fit a person with diabetes.

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loss show that people increase their chances of success when a coach, cheerleader, counselor—whatever you call your support person—offers feedback and encouragement. “The ability to communicate via chat rooms and blogs bonded me with people who not only supported my weight-loss endeavor but helped me through a difficult time,” Angela says. Research underscores that long-term weight control is more likely if support extends over time.

Some health professionals use online sites to supplement their recommended weight-loss strategy. The two-pronged attack has worked for Candy Erney, 37 and type 2, of Gold Bar, Washington. Candy sees dietitian and diabetes educator Jennifer Okemah, R.D., BC-ADM, in

Seattle and logs on to SparkPeople (sparkpeople.com) to track her food intake and follow her meal plan. Okemah directed Candy to the site. “I jointly set willing and able clients up on non-diabetes-specific online weight-control programs and personalize their meal plans,” Okemah says.

With the support of both Okemah and her online community, Candy is now losing weight and, more important, seeing her blood glucose levels in normal ranges. “Tracking my food intake has been a real eye-opener,” Candy says. “I had no idea that while carefully monitoring my carb counts I was breaking the calorie bank, eating 2,500 calories a day by overeating on fats.”

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Make the most of e-tools

Here’s what to do with the e-tools you’ll find on weight-loss sites:

Set goals. Calculate your body mass index (BMI) or waist-to-hip ratio and compare these stats with your doctor’s advice on how much weight you need to lose to see health benefits. Most experts say losing 1-2 pounds a week is a sensible goal and that shedding just 10-20 pounds offers many healthy benefits.

Check your status. Assess your food intake using food diaries and calorie trackers (you may be surprised at the totals).

Chart your course. Track your calories, exercise, and weight loss. It’s motivating, and the info is useful to share with your doctor.

Get moving. Seek customized fitness plans, activity trackers, and videos that show you how to exercise properly.

Stay connected. Join or read chats, discussion forums, message boards, and blogs for peer and professional support. This may be the most important feature of any site.

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Factoring in diabetes

So is it safe for someone with diabetes to join a generic weight-loss plan? “These programs will be safe for most people with type 2 diabetes for whom weight loss is one key to achieving their diabetes treatment goals,” says Lynn Grieger, R.D., CDE, a diabetes educator and health coach in Manchester, Vermont. Weight loss can require dosing changes for certain medications. If you take a blood glucose-lowering med that can cause hypoglycemia, tell your health-care team about your weight-loss plans.

Weighing the costs

Consider finances before you join a weight-loss Web site. “Costs range from free to \$100 a month, with the average for fee-based programs at no more than \$20 a month,” Burke says. She stresses that you should “read the fine print.” Is there a minimum duration you must sign up for? Are there additional services, such as phone consultations, that cost extra?

Grieger encourages people to consider which e-tools they’ll use, rather than the volume of members or site design. Take a tour before you join.

The real cost advantage is determined by what you put into the online weight-loss program. “The amount of effort and time you commit to this process is what you’ll get out,” Burke says. “If you’re searching for a magic bullet, online services don’t cast a magic spell any more than land-based programs.”



Hope Warshaw wrote the *American Diabetes Association’s Diabetes Meal Planning Made Easy* and is a member of this magazine’s editorial advisory board.

From for-a-fee to free

There are four categories of weight-management Web sites:

1. Commercial weight-loss programs, such as Jenny Craig (jennycraig.com) and Weight Watchers (weightwatchers.com), have Web sites for people who join their face-to-face programs or subscribe to online services only.

2. Online-only fee-based programs are the most widely available. A sampling includes calorieking.com, weightloss.webmd.com, diet.com, caloriecounts.com, and ediets.com. They have many similar e-tools, such as food diaries, chat rooms, and nutrient calculators. One site, uvm.edu/vtrim, developed by Jean Harvey-Berino, Ph.D., R.D., from a research project at the University of Vermont, offers the expected e-tools along with weekly phone-in group meetings led by professionals.

3. Free sites affiliated with companies or products for diabetes or weight control, such as LifeScan (onetouchgold.com), Glucerna (diabetescontrolforlife.com), Novo Nordisk (changingdiabetes-us.com), and Slim Fast (slim-fast.com), offer free and valuable resources, but expect to receive mailings touting their products.

4. Free programs, which are supported by tax dollars or on-site advertising, include sparkpeople.com, fitday.com, and www.mypyramidtracker.gov, which is sponsored by U.S. Health and Human Services.

