

point, click, lose

Explore new ways to win at weight loss with online and telephone programs.

BY Hope S. Warshaw, R.D., CDE

PHOTOS BY Kritsada

Technology offers new approaches to the ongoing challenge of trimming pounds. Time and money constraints can make weekly in-person weight-control programs inconvenient and unaffordable.

Instead envision a weekly phone call with your coach. An online group chat with your dietitian. Joining a

community of people with diabetes (PWDs) who are tackling weight loss together.

Virtual weight loss venues are growing, and many are convenient and affordable. Here, frontline researchers, program facilitators, and PWDs weigh in on the programs' effectiveness.

types of programs

1.

Expert-led with group support

EXAMPLE: BMIQ (formerly Cardiometabolic Support Network, BMIQ.com), is a

16-week group program facilitated on the telephone at set times by an experienced dietitian. You receive an expert assessment, and your facilitator knows your medical story. Three eating plans offer sample meals, featuring foods with a low glycemic index, lower-fat foods, or packaged foods such as Lean Cuisine. Choose among PWD-only or mixed groups.

Success story: Beatrice Grant, 57, PWD type 2 from Marlboro, Massachusetts, was stuck at 230 pounds, and her medications were mounting to control blood glucose, blood pressure, and gastric reflux.

She trimmed down to just under 200 pounds and is now just above that mark. "Being able to cut out or down on my meds was a big win for me," she says.

Learnings: "I've changed my mind-set about food and exercise," Beatrice says. "Now my exercise bag remains packed for the Y."

Pros and cons: Beatrice's employer paid for this program (BMIQ contracts with health plans). "I got to choose the type of food plan—it didn't feel like a diet," she says. The dietitian was consistently positive, pointing out the upsides of Beatrice's problems and progress. "I was energized by the ideas and support from other participants." But by the end of the program, Beatrice found the content redundant.

EXAMPLE: Vtrim (vtrimonline.com) is a 12- or 24-week program facilitated by trained health care professionals through online group text chats at set times. The facilitator, a cheerleader and adviser, offers weekly input on your online food and exercise journals and consults with you by e-mail.

Success story: Peter Morris, 67, PWD type 2 from Vergennes, Vermont, topped 300 pounds when diagnosed with diabetes. He lost 65 pounds though Vtrim. He's gained back a few pounds but works hard to keep extra weight at bay. His pharmacy bill is slimmer. "My health plan and I are saving nearly \$400 a month."

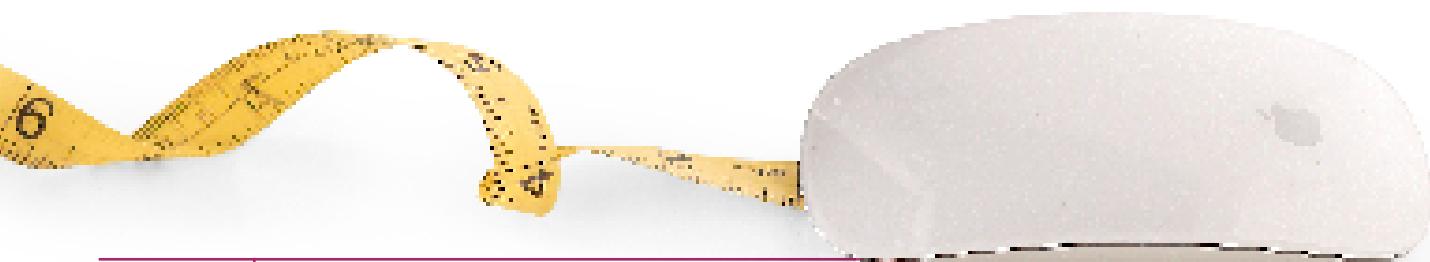
Learnings: "Early in the program I finally got it: I've got to be a constantly conscious eater," Peter says. "To stay focused, I weigh myself daily, mentally recommit, and account for my actions by journaling food and exercise."

Pros and cons: "Engaging in the program carved out time for me to develop new, healthier eating skills and habits to practice the rest of my life," he says. "The big focus on exercise helped me realize it's simply a must." There was, however, too much repeat information in the final weeks. And Peter's speedy weight drop as the sole man in his group made a few female foes.

Virtual support, real counselors

Do virtual weight-control programs work? "Research concludes that people can successfully lose weight and keep it off as long as there is weekly support provided by a professionally trained counselor," says Delia West, Ph.D., a professor at University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock.

The research doesn't include go-it-alone programs, such as SparkPeople (sparkpeople.com) or Lose It! (loseit.com). "These unassisted programs haven't been rigorously studied. From what's known about what it takes to lose weight and keep it off, I'd bet weight loss is far inferior to programs using trained facilitators," says Cynthia Belliveau, Ed.D., director of Vtrim and dean of continuing education at the University of Vermont in Burlington.



2.

Online, self-directed

Internet-assisted weight loss programs are gaining popularity, with features such as tools for tracking food and exercise, healthful recipes, helpful videos, and supportive communities and message boards to offer or seek counsel from fellow dieters. Some programs charge a fee

(\$5–\$10 weekly), such as Weight Watchers (weightwatchers.com), CalorieKing (calorieking.com), eDiets (ediets.com), and MyFoodDiary.com (myfooddiary.com). Other programs are free, including SparkPeople (sparkpeople.com), Lose It! (loseit.com), MyPlate (livestrong.com/thedailyplate), and FitDay (fitday.com). Most of these programs, with the exception of the time-tested Weight Watchers, are offered only online.

EXAMPLE: SparkPeople is a free program that has garnered attention due to its strength in numbers, strong community, and team approach. “We boast over 50,000 diabetes team members who cheer you on in your efforts,” says Nicole Nichols, an editor with SparkPeople. She says people are more willing to share their real-life issues when they have the anonymity of the Internet. If you check diabetes as a health condition when you enroll, you’ll be linked to diabetes-specific tracking tools and educational materials.

Success story: Jeff Suddeth, 40, PWD type 2 from Chicago, was nearly 250 pounds with blood glucose hovering at 400 mg/dl when diagnosed with diabetes. His doctor didn’t push him to lose weight right away. “My wife was my spark for SparkPeople. She set up an account for me,” Jeff says. He had tried lots of diets, including a

low-carb eating plan and Nutrisystem, but the weight hadn’t stayed off. With SparkPeople he lost 20 pounds initially and has gained some back. “I’m now back at it, and I’ve started running,” Jeff says. He continues to take Lantus insulin and metformin.

Learnings: “I’ve got to have a plan that fits into my life as well as my family’s life,” Jeff says. “I have young children I need to feed and I want to eat with. And I’m slowly learning I just can’t go and eat chocolate cake when I want it.”

Pros and cons: The online food journal with a large food database is the feature Jeff uses most. He also likes being part of a diabetes team. “It connects me on a human level with people who are going through what I’m going through.”

With so many online features, it was hard to know where to begin. “They send out lots of articles, almost too many. The ones I choose to read are relevant and helpful,” Jeff says. Some of your online profile information is public, but privacy settings are available.



Big benefits

People typically lose the most weight—5–7 percent of body weight—by one year into a program. They often gain back a few pounds, but that’s OK. “This relatively small weight loss is associated with significant improvements in cardiovascular risk factors and glucose control,” says Look AHEAD (Action for Health in Diabetes) study investigator Delia Smith West, Ph.D.



3.

Facilitated, with packaged foods

Some nationwide programs, including Jenny Craig (jennycraig.com) and type 2 diabetes-specific Nutrisystem D (nutrisystem.com), run programs that help you avoid cooking; they require you to purchase their packaged foods. Nutrisystem D offers 24/7 phone counseling but no assigned dietitian or regularly scheduled sessions.

EXAMPLE: Jenny Craig is facilitated at program locations (in person) or by phone (at home). Delia Smith West, Ph.D., who is a member of Jenny Craig's advisory board, says research comparing each style of Jenny Craig programs indicates both produce similar weight loss results. In either program you chat with your trained coach for about 15 minutes each week. Program length is based on your weight loss goals. You purchase packaged foods directly from Jenny Craig for most meals and snacks during the program. PWDs who are not on blood glucose-lowering medications can easily enroll in either program, but PWDs on medications must take a few extra precautionary steps that involve Jenny Craig experts and your health care provider.

"Our facilitators are continually trained by Jenny Craig's dietitians. Our program is research-based with three tenets: portion-controlled

foods; use of low-energy, high-volume foods; and behavioral-change strategies," says Lisa Talamini, R.D., Jenny Craig vice president of research and program innovation in Carlsbad, California.

Success story: Jan Feese, 64, PWD type 2 from Valdosta, Georgia, gained weight when she quit smoking. After being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes and starting Actos and metformin, she gained more weight. "I'm on my second go-around with Jenny Craig at home. I'd rather attend in person, but there's no location nearby," Jan says. She gained back the weight she lost during her first session because of a back injury. This time around, "I've lost 30 pounds, and I'm off my glucose-lowering medicine," Jan says.

Learnings: "I'm continually psyching myself for the long road ahead by maintaining a healthy routine," Jan says.

Pros and cons: "Accountability: Knowing I have to talk to my coach weekly makes me toe the line," Jan says. She likes talking to the same person each week, who is "sincerely happy for me when I make progress." On the minus side, the program (and food) is pricey. Jan misses planning, shopping for, and cooking meals. 🍴

Hope Warsaw, R.D., CDE, an author and diabetes consultant, has facilitated weight loss groups for Vtrim and BMIQ.

Evidence shows that people who do well with weight loss programs are those who show up and take full advantage of the support. "People need continuous support—someone to hold their hand and cheer them on over time."

—Anne Wolf, R.D., researcher, University of Virginia School of Medicine, Charlottesville