

NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAMMES : THE EFFECT OF FORMAT AND HEALTH SCREENING ON DROP-OUT RATES

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Recent population surveys in South Australia have shown substantial interest in participation in nutrition education programmes, particularly amongst the middle-aged groups and white-collar workers. In addition, just over half of all respondents, and particularly those from rural areas, were most interested in the availability of courses conducted through the post as opposed to centralised, group courses or individual counselling (McConaghy unpubl.). However, the effectiveness of education programmes conducted through the post is unknown. In addition, the benefits of personal health screening in relation to such courses has not been formally assessed.

A study was therefore undertaken to compare the effectiveness of a postal nutrition intervention programme (with or without screening) with a more formal, centralized, small-group course. A six-week, interactive nutrition programme was designed using behavioural modification approaches, to increase knowledge and skills and promote long term dietary change. The participants in the study were recruited through public advertisement. The programs were conducted concurrently either as a "group" programme (participants attended one 2 hour lecture/activity session each week) or as a "mail" programme (participants received lecture notes and practical exercises through the postal system each week). Dietary intake and knowledge was determined prior to the programme. Biomedical measures such as height, weight, skinfolds, blood pressure and blood lipids, were also undertaken for half the participants in each programme before commencement. Recruits were followed-up six months after the programme and further dietary intake, knowledge and biomedical measures were taken.

COURSE CATEGORY	n	Sex		Age		Occupational Status		Drop-Outs (%)
		M	F	mean	range	mean	range	
"GROUP" screened #	63	11	52	46.7	18-67	37.7	22-61	14
unscreened *	59	11	48	46.2	21-68	38.4	19-66	51
"MAIL" screened	59	17	42	43.5	17-63	37.3	21-55	27
unscreened	58	12	46	44.0	24-73	38.1	18-59	36

biomedical measures taken

* no biomedical measures taken

The results of this study indicate that recruits to a postal, nutrition intervention programme did not differ markedly from those to a "classroom" style programme in their age, sex, occupational status, nutrient profile or body mass index. The rate of drop-out from the programme did, however, differ significantly between the mail and group settings but screening for biomedical measures was the more potent predictor of non-completion of the programme. Long-term changes in knowledge, dietary habits and biomedical measures are currently being assessed to ascertain the effectiveness of the various formats.

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