



# EAT SMART, BE FIT, MARYLAND!:

## WEB-BASED NUTRITION EDUCATION FOR LIMITED INCOME FAMILIES

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### EAT SMART, BE FIT, MARYLAND!: WEB-BASED NUTRITION EDUCATION FOR LIMITED INCOME FAMILIES



### LEARNING OUTCOME

Describe how web-based interventions can be used to promote positive health behaviors in low literate audiences.

### ABSTRACT

Goals of the Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) program include helping limited income individuals and families make healthy food choices, develop food preparation and budgeting skills, and increase their physical activity. Recognizing the Internet as an information source to the entire population, including limited income individuals, one state's FSNE program developed the "Eat Smart, Be Fit, Maryland!" website as part of a research project to promote healthy living. This website targets limited income adult women with school-age children and provides online nutrition, food budgeting, and physical activity information.

Website users register, complete three health behavior profiles and "surf" through a collection of health-related information. Interactive resources and tools were developed at a 6th grade or lower reading level to promote FSNE goals. Website development began following a comprehensive needs assessment conducted in five counties, with content, message and usability testing to inform the process.

In 2006, a statewide media and information campaign began to promote wider usage. The site has been evaluated for effectiveness and continues to undergo further testing to ensure its appropriateness, relevance, and navigability to the target population. Dietetic interns gather monthly county resource updates and participate in statewide website dissemination efforts. It also allows them to interact with clients to "see" the issues faced by these individuals.

### BACKGROUND

- The Public Health Informatics Research Laboratory (PHI) collaborated with the Maryland Cooperative Extension's Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNE) to conduct a study on ways to improve the nutrition of limited resource populations in Maryland.
- The Eat Smart, Be Fit, Maryland! Project, funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), was initiated to address the nutrition, weight control, and physical activity patterns and needs of food stamp eligible families in Maryland through innovative methods.

The two main goals of the program are to:

- Improve the overall health of limited resource populations in Maryland by reducing diet and physical activity related risks of chronic disease and increasing available resources.
- Test the efficacy of digital inclusion and understand how technology can be used to promote health.

### EAT SMART, BE FIT, MARYLAND!... THE WEBSITE!

Participants interested in the Eat Smart, Be Fit, Maryland website visit, [www.eatsmart.umd.edu](http://www.eatsmart.umd.edu) where they register and receive access to nutrition information.



Eat Smart, Be Fit, Maryland! main menus include:

- Feed Your Mind
- Cooking Class
- Stay Connected
- Activities

Participants can "Feed Their Mind" and gather information about:

- Planning Meals
- Eating on a Budget
- Staying Active
- Maintaining Your Weight
- Raising Healthy Kids
- Time Management



"Cooking Class" allows participants to learn about keeping food safe, healthy cooking, smart shopping, and ideas for feeding babies.



Participants can "Stay Connected" by searching for community events by county and save money on groceries by choosing local food stores to get the sales flyers for the week.



Using information from the website, participants have access to "Activities" which consist of food and physical activity logs, food budgeting games and a pledge to continue healthy behaviors.

### DIETETIC INTERNS PROMOTE EAT SMART, BE FIT, MARYLAND!

The University of Maryland, College Park Dietetic Interns work in conjunction with the Eat Smart, Be Fit, Maryland! program to help promote the website. Interns upload upcoming community events, by county, to the website and attend some of these events to provide potential participants with information about the benefits of the Eat Smart, Be Fit, Maryland! program. Interns attend community events such as WIC classes, county health fairs and festivals to gain experience with the population being served.

At these community events, interns develop handouts related to a healthy lifestyle such as "Fruits and Vegetables for your Health", "Eat Smart. Plan Ahead", "Weight Management and Physical Activity" and "Stretch your Food Dollar". Interns also bring laptops to browse the website with visitors, providing opportunities to interact with the participants.



Haley Knutson (left) and Elizabeth Widen (right) at the annual Maryland Day, April 28, 2007 at the University of Maryland, College Park.



Elise Sterbinsky visits a WIC Clinic in Anne Arundel County to disseminate information about "Shopping Tips" and "Stretching Your Food Dollars".



Amanda Croll provided information about Shopping Tips at Money Power Day in Baltimore, Maryland.

### CONCLUSION

Utilizing the Internet to disseminate health-related information to underserved populations provides participants with science-based, practical information about healthy living. Participants can improve their quality of life by learning how to choose healthier foods and include physical activity into their daily lives. This website also promotes the involvement of children to help establish a healthy lifestyle in their youth. Including information on food budgeting, food safety and smart shopping teaches participants the fundamentals of purchasing, preparing and selecting the appropriate foods to maintain a healthy family.

Including dietetic interns in the process of disseminating nutrition information allows them to experience the challenges and benefits of public health initiatives. Interns can interact with targeted populations and determine if their needs are being met and/or develop other methods to reach the targeted audience. With this experience, interns can pursue non-conventional jobs related to public health and participate in future health initiatives with sufficient knowledge.

Visit the website at:  
<http://www.eatsmart.umd.edu>

For more information, email:  
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