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Understanding How Overweight and Obese Emerging Adults Make Lifestyle Choices

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Highlights

- â€¢ Emerging adults' decisions are rational reactions to their environment and limited resources.
- â€¢ Behavioral interventions for emerging adults are necessary to decrease the perceived cost of making healthy choices.
- â€¢ Emerging adults need to develop skills to enhance health literacy and problem solving thereby allowing them the ability to calculate the cost of healthy choices.

Purpose

To better understand health-related decision making among overweight and obese emerging adults.

Design and Methods

A cross-sectional design was used in the parent study involving overweight and obese emerging adults, ages 18–29 years. The goal of the parent study was to screen participants' diabetes risk and identify characteristics of emerging adults with prediabetes ($N = 107$). A sub-sample of respondents ($n = 34$) from the parent study were invited to participate in focus group interviews depending on whether they had prediabetes (three groups) or they did not have prediabetes (four groups). Each focus group interview lasted 90–120 minutes following a semi-structured interview guide. Conventional content analysis was used in the data analysis. Because of the similarities between participants with and without prediabetes, the findings were synthesized and reported in the aggregate. Moreover, during the analysis, the authors decided that rational choice theory provided a useful organizing structure for presenting the data.

Results

Emerging adults' behavioral decisions were rational reactions to their personal competence, perception of health, environment, and availability of resources to handle problems. Calculation of trade-offs and estimations of resource availability were often used when making decisions.

Conclusions

Emerging adults choose unhealthy behaviors due to inaccurate information and insufficient competence to practice healthy lifestyles rather than because of laziness or being irrational.

Practice Implications

Behavioral interventions for emerging adults need to help them develop skills to enhance health literacy and problem solving, thereby enhancing their awareness of available resources and decreasing the perceived cost of making healthy choices.



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Key words

Emerging adults; Healthy behavioral choices; Rational choice theory; Health promotion

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