

How Web and Mobile Technologies Are Changing Nutrition Education

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Brief Description:

Web and mobile nutrition education technologies are powerful tools in helping people of all ages make dietary change. More and more seniors are adopting both the internet and smartphones. Here is why you should consider adopting nutrition education technologies into already existing programs for seniors.

This submission was selected as part of a national challenge issued to leaders in all communities seeking new “best practices” and “best possibilities” for the future of nutrition and aging.

Hello, my name is Marci Harnischfeger MS RD. I am a Registered Dietitian, chef, and nutrition educator. I am also Head Dietitian for ShopWell (www.shopwell.com), a nutrition education website and mobile app that helps you improve the foods you eat and build healthy grocery lists. I want to share with you today how technologies, like ShopWell, increase access to nutrition education and food label reading and also aid healthcare teams to help provide low cost, effective nutrition education.

At ShopWell we believe in the importance of nutrition education for people of all ages including seniors. Our technology is based upon the principle that nutrition education is most helpful when it is personalized to the individual's age, gender, and health and nutrition goals. We believe in simple, easy to understand information and that small changes overtime result in a big impact on health.

Today two thirds of adult Americans are overweight or obese (1) and 45% of adult Americans have one or more food-related chronic medical condition such as high cholesterol, diabetes, and high blood pressure. (2) Access to nutrition education, to nutrient information for the foods people eat each day, and to nutritious meals cooked with people's dietary considerations in mind is now more important than ever.

As we age, we have a higher risk for developing diet-related medical conditions and an increased need to make sure that the foods we eat are helpful for our well-being,

medical conditions, and work with our medications. As calorie needs decline, food label reading becomes increasingly important to make sure that you are getting the proper balance of nutrients in your diet. The most bang for your nutritional buck so to speak.

Technology now allows us to get the information we need in the comfort of our own home and even on the go at the grocery store. The internet is already a huge part of people's lives. Seniors 65 and over spend almost 3 hours per week surfing the web. People ages 50 to 64: just over 5 hours per week (3) and 66% of adults use the internet to look up medical information. (4) Smartphones-which mobile devices that allow for much more than a phone call including web surfing, news feeds, and barcode scanning-are increasing in popularity at an exponential rate in all age groups. Over 25% of people over the age of 55 who own a mobile phone now own a smartphone (5), and the number is growing every day.

At ShopWell, we couple the on demand nature of both the internet and the smartphone with the expertise of Registered Dietitians, peer reviewed research, and government guidelines to create a personalized nutrition education system that can help you make quick, easy, and healthy changes in the foods you bring home from the grocery store.

Roughly 80% of people frequently or occasionally look at nutrition information on packages, but 55% of people understand half or less of the ingredients. (6) Not to mention the smaller percentage of people that understand how the nutrients and ingredients apply to them. Research also shows that people who read food labels make healthier choices. (7) The key is to focus people in on the information that is right for them.

When people get tailored nutrition information about the foods that are most familiar to them-the packaged and whole food items found right in the regular grocery store that they, or their loved ones, bring into their home each day-they can start to understand which nutrients and ingredients are important to them and get a sense of healthier options that might work better. Imagine getting feedback on your favorite cereal, that granola bar you saw on tv, or the chips you grew up with since you were a child. How much of that avocado should I eat? Can I have broccoli instead of spinach? Which cut of meat should I buy?

Today's technology makes that happen. Because web and mobile programs are adaptable, they can be made to fit in with which ever healthy eating plan one is working with and used whether one is checking in with their dietitian and medical team

frequently or looking for a tool to help manage their diet on their own. These technologies are available when the person needs it most-at home or at the grocery store- and can work within one's own learning schedule any time of the day or night. We have had an overwhelming response from people of all ages, almost 20% of our audience is over 50. And people like personalized nutrition education as almost 90% of people customize the system to better match their needs.

I joined ShopWell because I know the power of food label reading in helping people reach dietary compliance. From my past experiences with patients and in the classroom-whether it be from grocery store tours to pantry reviews to simply searching for the nutrition information for people's favorite foods-meeting people where they are in their food journey and teaching them using foods they are familiar with has been very successful for me. Through the power of technology I can now help millions of people find nutrition information and learn to read food labels. Nutrition information on demand goes a long way in convincing people that healthy eating is achievable just by taking one step at a time.

I firmly believe that people can improve their health and diet on any budget, with any medical condition, but that they need the tools and know how delivered in a simple, easy to understand way for them. Technology now allows you to have that personalized guidance around the food you eat right when you need it-at the store, when you are about to prepare or eat a meal, or you are making a list to shop with-and show your practitioner exactly which foods you are eating, so they can tune your eating plan to you.

Imagine on demand access for carbohydrate numbers, sodium levels, allergy information, etc. for hundreds of thousands of foods and how helpful that would be for people managing a variety of health conditions from diabetes to food allergies to high blood pressure. Online nutrition education services give you access to the nutrition and ingredient information and guidance from trusted resources. The best ones are easy to grasp for any age from children to seniors. Medical practitioners, dietitians, and others can also use these technologies too in their education plans to help support their teachings when the patients need it most: at the grocery store and during meals.

Food is all around us. Each one of us has different needs, but each one of us is entitled to a basic understanding of nutrition and our health.

We applaud the work done by the National Aging Network for the millions of seniors they serve each day. I personally have referred many patients to senior nutrition

programs and have been delighted by their ability to cater both meals and nutrition education to people with complex medical conditions who do not have the ability to create nutritious meals on their own.

Technology platforms, like ShopWell, that are free, simple to access, and easy to understand are essential as well. They are key to raising everyone's awareness about how the foods they eat-the foods all around them-affect health and well-being. They are the small nudge, the constant companion, the tool that people can use to support their doctors and dietitians advice in how to keep themselves healthy.

I strongly urge you to consider continuing to incorporate well researched, relevant technological based systems when developing nutrition education programs for seniors and their families.

Thank you.

References

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