

Influences on patient uptake and engagement with the NHS Digital Diabetes Prevention Programme: a qualitative interview study

The aim of this research study was to explore people's decision making around taking up and using (or not) the *Healthier You: NHS Digital Diabetes Prevention Programme*.

What we knew

Around 5 million people in England have what is called "prediabetes" meaning a higher than normal blood sugar level that without lifestyle changes puts someone at risk of developing Type 2 diabetes. In response to this the NHS launched the *Healthier You: NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme* to help people make lifestyle changes to reduce the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes. Previous studies have shown this programme, which is delivered in-person in groups, to be successful in helping people lose weight and reduce blood sugar levels.

However, we also know that it is hard for some people to participate in the programme, especially those who work or who have caring responsibilities to participate. Because of this, a digital version (*The Healthier You: NHS **Digital** Diabetes Prevention Programme*) was launched in 2019, which delivers lifestyle change support for weight loss, healthy eating and physical activity, using digital tools. These tools include apps which allow users to access health coaches, set and monitor goals electronically, access online educational material and peer support groups, and provide wearable technologies that monitor levels of physical activity.

What we did

We were interested in exploring people's decision making around taking up and using the digital programme as previous studies have shown that digital health interventions like these can be successful in reducing the risk of diabetes, but there are sometimes problems with getting people to participate in these programmes. We wanted to talk to people about the factors that influenced their decision to take up and use (or not) the digital programme so that we could make recommendations on how to improve the delivery of this service and promote take up and use.

To study this, we carried out detailed one-to-one interviews over the telephone and over the online platform Zoom with 32 people who had been diagnosed with prediabetes and who had been offered the digital programme within 5 weeks or less.

People at risk of developing Type 2 diabetes are offered the programme by their GP practices or can access it by taking an online risk score via the Diabetes UK website. People who take it up have access to the programme for 9 months. Because we were interested in people's decisions about taking up the programme, we spoke to people who had been using the programme for 5 weeks or less.

We interviewed people from a range of backgrounds, ages, and genders and spoke to people who had decided to take up the NHS Digital Diabetes Prevention Programme as well as those who had

not. *The Healthier You: NHS Digital Diabetes Prevention Programme* is delivered by four different providers who all have slightly different interventions. We spoke to people who were using all four of these different interventions.

What we found

Our analysis of these interviews highlights factors that are important for people when they make decisions about taking up and using (or not) the Healthier You: NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme (in general) and other factors that are important specifically for making their decision to take up and use the digital programme.

Factors that influenced decisions about whether someone wanted to participate in any sort of diabetes prevention programme included how much knowledge and understanding they have about what prediabetes is and the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes. Those who had a better understanding of what prediabetes is and those who perceived Type 2 diabetes to be a serious condition were likely to want to take part in the programme and make lifestyle changes.

However, people who had family members who had developed Type 2 diabetes were less certain about how useful the programme might be in helping them prevent Type 2 diabetes, believing it to be inevitable. Participants who didn't think of themselves as typical of someone who has diabetes, including those who were not overweight were doubtful about how useful a prevention programme would be for them, especially as they viewed the aim of the programme to be about weight loss.

There were several barriers to taking up the programme which included how referrals to the programme were made and how information was provided about the programme. Some people didn't think they had been given enough information about prediabetes or what the programme was for. Those who had not taken up the programme reported not realising that they had been offered it, or not knowing there was a digital option. Others had not felt ready to use the programme and others said they didn't have enough time because of their busy lives to take part.

Several factors related specifically to the take up and use of the digital programme. Many people were positive about the digital way in which the programme was delivered, particularly enjoying the convenience and accessibility. Many thought digital was a better way of delivering the programme than in-person groups as they could use it whenever they wanted, and didn't have to travel or take part in discussions with others.

People particularly liked digital features that helped them to visualise and monitor goals, and track behaviours such as physical activity and diet, which they said helped them feel motivated. However, some people wanted to have more information on how the changes they were making to their lifestyle were impacting on their risk of developing Type 2 diabetes. Health coaches, who provided one-to-one contact either via messaging or remote conversations were another feature that people particularly valued. People said the health coaches helped with tailoring the programme, provided support and helped them stay feeling accountable.

Recommendations

Based on these findings we were able to make the following recommendations to try and improve take up and use of *The Healthier You: NHS Digital Diabetes Prevention Programme*.

To improve take up we suggest that more discussions with people about what prediabetes is and how diabetes risk can be reduced is important when someone is diagnosed with prediabetes. This would also help people understand how a diabetes prevention programme can be useful. Information about the programme should be tailored for certain groups, including those with a family history of Type 2 diabetes and those who are not overweight which would help them understand how the programme can be beneficial to them.

It is important to raise the awareness of the availability of the digital programme which is likely to appeal to many people because of the accessibility and convenience of a digital platform. To promote use of the digital programme, features that help people feel motivated and accountable, including the health coaches and tracking features should be core components of these programmes.

Finally, we also suggest that incorporating a way for participants to check how the changes they are making are impacting on their diabetes risk, for example by having another blood test during the course of the programme, would promote continued use.

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