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Knowledge about cardiovascular disease is low and stress is highly prevalent among U.S. adolescents and young adults and may adversely affect future cardiovascular health

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Background & Aim: Adverse cardiovascular habits often form early in life and many young people are not educated about health habits. Finding ways to engage adolescents and young adults with health messages is one strategy in improving cardiovascular health. In order to best design appropriate health messages, we employed surveys to evaluate health status of young people.

Methods: A cohort of 57 adolescents and young adults between ages 13-25 were recruited from U.S. middle schools, high schools, and colleges. We collected baseline in order to assess the feasibility of delivering weekly health questions and tips via automated text messages. Surveys were administered assessing diet quality, physical activity, stress levels, hours of sleep, and tobacco use using a scaled response (graded from 1 to 5 or from none to always). This study has been approved by the UCLA Institutional Review Board.

Results: Mean age of participants was 19.7±1.9 years (67.8% female). Only 9% of respondents felt very knowledgeable about heart disease or cardiovascular risk factors. 62% admitted they did not know how to prevent heart disease. Most participants do not smoke, most eat high quality diets and most sleep at least 7 hours nightly. Most participants feel that stress is their greatest risk factor for heart disease. When asked “In the last 3 months how often were you stressed or had trouble relaxing?” 95% responded “half of the time”.

Conclusion: Among U.S. adolescents and young adults knowledge about heart disease and cardiovascular risk factors is low. Fortunately tobacco use is declining and diets are improving among adolescents and young adults in the United States. Unfortunately stress is highly prevalent and many young people feel unprepared to address this risk factor and this may adversely affect future cardiovascular health.

Biography

Kaya Branche is a Co-Founder of UCLA Teen Heart Health Program. She is a Professor in Department of Cardiology at David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, USA.

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