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The Cooperative Extension System's Use of USDA's Online Food and Physical Activity Tracker–SuperTracker

Abstract

Nutrition professionals within the Cooperative Extension system use the USDA's interactive online tool SuperTracker, which is designed to help individuals track diet and physical activity (PA) to apply healthy eating patterns and improve PA. An investigation of all 50 states' Extension websites and interviews of Extension of educators revealed that SuperTracker information was posted at state or county level Extension websites. SuperTracker is being used for nutrition workshop, nutrition educators' training, weight management, and PA planning and assessment in community based programs.

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Introduction

The effectiveness of healthy diet, physical activity (PA), and weight management programs depends, in part, on nutrition educators providing tools that help their target audience increase awareness of current habits, target behaviors for change, and track outcomes (Mullins, Sigler, & Miller-Spillman, 2014). SuperTracker is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) free, online tool for planning, analysis, and assessment of diet as well as monitoring PA and developing weight management plan. Extension nutrition educators and health professionals at state and county levels are using SuperTracker in their community programs and showcasing the program on their websites.

This article describes how nutrition and health professionals post and provide information about SuperTracker through their Extension websites. State Extension educators (county faculty members and front-line educators) were interviewed about their use of SuperTracker within their programs. If educators were not currently using

SuperTracker, information was provided as to how it could enhance their existing nutrition and PA programs.

Program Description

SuperTracker allows individuals to create a personal profile and record daily food intake and PA. The user enters foods consumed and PA engaged in for one or more days. The program then provides immediate summary feedback about the number and quantity of food consumed, the nutrient and energy contents of these foods, (i.e., 34 nutrients, vitamins, and minerals) and compares these data to daily energy and dietary recommendations. SuperTracker also provides upper limits for empty calories, oils, saturated fat, and sodium. Weekly PA level is compared to the national PA recommendations (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2008).

The program provides nearly 800 PA such as walking, running, strength conditioning, sports, and various forms of house work (e.g., cleaning, vacuuming). If weight, height, and age are provided, the "My Weight Manager" page in SuperTracker estimates the amount of energy (kcal) expended for each PA performed. Finally, the program has a goal setting option on the My Top 5 Goals page, where individuals can set goals and measure progress, with virtual coaching available to encourage healthy changes (Haven, Chang, Herrup, & Maniscalco, 2013; Post, Haven, Chang, & Bard, 2012; Post, Herrup, Chang, & Leone, 2012; Post, Maniscalco, Herrup, & Chang, 2012). The program complements the obesity-combating strategies suggested by MyPlate, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* campaign.

Methods

Within the U.S., all state and county Extension websites were searched for any SuperTracker postings. We examined each state's Extension website by typing "SuperTracker" in a search box. If this search did not yield results, we searched under healthy living, families and consumer sciences, food safety, or nutrition-related Web pages, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education page (Table 1). Extension professionals who posted SuperTracker on their home pages or integrated it into their programs were identified for potential interviews.

Twelve Extension educators were interviewed regarding their current use and experiences with SuperTracker. For those Extension educators not using SuperTracker, we solicited reasons for not using the program and asked about alternative programs they were using or recommend. The interview was continued until their responses were repeated.

Table 1.

Incorporation of SuperTracker Information into Extension Websites, Search Box, Description, Contact Information and Programing

State	Extension websites	Search Box ^a	Description ^b	Contact Information ^c	Used in Program ^d
AK	http://www.uaf.edu/ces/		X	X	
AL	http://www.aces.edu/main/	X	X	X	
AR	http://division.uaex.edu/				
AZ	http://extension.arizona.edu/				
CA	http://ucanr.edu/	X	X	X	
CO	http://www.ext.colostate.edu/index.html				X
CT	http://www.extension.uconn.edu/		X		
DC	http://www.udc.edu/college_urban_agriculture_and_environmental_studies/				

	cooperative_extension_service				
DE	http://extension.udel.edu/			X	
FL	http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/		X	X	
GA	http://extension.uga.edu/	X	X	X	
HI	http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/Site/Extprograms.aspx				
IA	http://www.extension.iastate.edu/	X	X	X	
ID	http://www.uidaho.edu/extension				X
IL	http://web.extension.illinois.edu/state/index.html			X	
IN	http://www3.ag.purdue.edu/extension/Pages/default.aspx	X		X	
KS	http://www.k-state.edu/				
KY	http://ces.ca.uky.edu/ces/	X	X	X	
LA	http://www.lsuagcenter.com/		X	X	
MA	http://ag.umass.edu/	X			
MD	http://extension.umd.edu/	X	X	X	X
ME	http://extension.umaine.edu/			X	
MI	http://msue.anr.msu.edu/		X	X	
MN	http://msue.anr.msu.edu/		X	X	
MO	http://extension.missouri.edu/	X	X	X	
MS	http://msucares.com/	X		X	
MT	https://www.msuextension.org/				
NC	http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/	X		X	
ND	http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension	X		X	
NE	http://www.extension.unl.edu/web/extension/home	X	X	X	
NH	http://extension.unh.edu/	X			X
NJ	http://njaes.rutgers.edu/	X	X	X	X
NM	http://extension.nmsu.edu/			X	
NV	http://www.unce.unr.edu/				
NY	http://cce.cornell.edu/Pages/Default.aspx		X		X
OH	http://extension.osu.edu/				
OK	http://www.oces.okstate.edu/		X	X	
OR	http://extension.oregonstate.edu/	X	X	X	
PA	http://extension.psu.edu/	X		X	X
RI	http://cels.uri.edu/ce/				
SC	http://www.clemson.edu/extension/	X	X	X	

SD	http://www.sdstate.edu/sdsuextension/index.cfm	X	X		X
TN	https://utextension.tennessee.edu/Pages/default.aspx	X		X	
TX	http://agriflifeextension.tamu.edu/	X	X	X	
UT	http://extension.usu.edu/	X	X	X	
VA	http://www.ext.vt.edu/index.php				
VT	http://www.uvm.edu/extension/	X	X	X	
WA	http://ext.wsu.edu/	X	X	X	
WI	http://www.uwex.edu/ces/	X			
WV	http://www.ext.wvu.edu/	X	X		
WY	http://www.uwyo.edu/ces/	X		X	

^aSearch box: an "X" means SuperTracker information was found typing SuperTracker in search box

^bDescription: an "X" means detailed description of SuperTracker was found on the website

^cContact Information: an "X" means a contact person was listed within the SuperTracker description page

^dUsed in program: an "X" means SuperTracker was used in their Extension programs

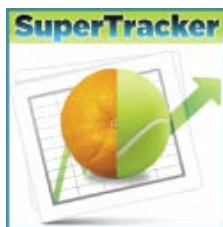
Note: Extension also runs through the 1890 Land-Grant Universities, and additional research is needed to determine if and to what extent their websites reference/utilize SuperTracker.

Results

All 50 states at state or county levels posted SuperTracker on their Extension websites, with access typically provided by either clicking on a SuperTracker button/logo (Figure 1) or one of the links under the MyPlate. Nearly half (49%) of the Extension websites included descriptions of SuperTracker, giving features and directions for use and tips for tracking diet and PA. A contact person was provided by 63% of states. Only eight states Extension websites (CO, ID, MD, NH, NJ, NY, PA, and SD) indicated that SuperTracker was used in a series of workshops to help adult and youth audiences understand the 2010 Dietary Guidelines and/or MyPlate recommendations (Table 1).

For example, in New York, SuperTracker was used as part of the nutrition educators' training program, while in South Dakota it was used in a lesson plan, designed to evaluate nutrition needs and create a meal plan for the youth in 9-12 grades. The Idaho (Jensen, 2013) and Colorado Extension educators used SuperTracker in their weight loss programs that promoted PA and wise food choices. Generally, SuperTracker information was provided through Extension newsletters/publications, handouts, presentation slides, and blog/short communications or simply listed as an educational resource on a Web link page.

Figure 1.
SuperTracker Button



All Extension educators interviewed (n=12) agreed that SuperTracker was a user-friendly, versatile tool for counting calories, tracking PA and food intake, and setting goals, all of which are essential attributes for weight management programs. In addition, SuperTracker provides various printable report forms, which may be distributed to participants. In Oklahoma, Extension educators use the SuperTracker when nutrition related classes are conducted for groups at a technology center, where participants have a computer access. Having a computer available for each individual makes it easy to teach how to use the SuperTracker program.

The most frequent challenges or limitations mentioned by SuperTracker users are 1) requirement of Internet access; 2) lack of convenience, they indicated that a SuperTracker mobile phone app would allow easier access during training sessions, at meal times, or making food choice at a grocery store; and 3) availability of alternative or equivalent programs, recommending programs currently available as mobile phone apps, such as My Fitness Pal (MyFitnessPal Inc., San Francisco, CA), which is available for a group or team-sharing.

The need for a SuperTracker mobile app has been recognized by the USDA, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, where the SuperTracker was created. The USDA is currently working on a SuperTracker mobile app that should be available sometime in 2014 (personal communication, Robert C. Post, past Associate Executive Director, USDA).

Conclusions

Our website search and interviews showed that Extension educators are using the SuperTracker to train nutrition educators, assist participants in learning about foods and nutrition, and help them with weight management. Extension educators also use SuperTracker to help engage participants enrolled in Extension events or in calculating the energy and nutrient content of recipes.

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