

## An interactive, individualized approach to promote physical activity on the population level

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**Introduction:** It is estimated that at least one third of the Swiss population is not active enough to meet current recommendations for health-enhancing physical activity. The need for interventions to promote physical activity has been recognized and has influenced the political agenda-setting.

*active-online.ch* is an interactive and individualized motivational program designed to be implemented country-wide on the internet. Currently, nearly two thirds of the Swiss households have access to the internet, therefore in this country the internet qualifies as a channel for an intervention on the population level. The program is available in German, French and Italian and targets individuals between about 30 and 60 years of age who are not physically active on a regular basis. An evaluation of a prior version of the website revealed that it is very well accepted, that the target population can be reached, and that compliance to the program is good. The public health impact of an intervention program is determined by its effectiveness and the proportion of the population that is reached. To our knowledge, no comparable program promoting physical activity has been disseminated population-wide so far and there are no studies assessing the effectiveness of internet-based intervention programs. The purpose of this paper is 1) to discuss first experiences with strategies to disseminate an individualized program country-wide and 2) to present design and participant recruitment as well as participants' characteristics of a feasibility study for an internet-based randomised controlled trial to assess the effectiveness of the program.

**Methods:** The website [www.active-online.ch](http://www.active-online.ch) was officially launched on April 24<sup>th</sup> 2003 with a PR-event and a media communiqué. Contacts and communication channels of the nationally operating project partners will be used to further disseminate the program. A collaboration with the largest Swiss internet portal is being negotiated.

A feasibility study for a randomized controlled trial was conducted on the internet. Volunteers were recruited for a "health study" through two different channels: Firstly, with small advertisements in two newspapers and on three internet portals, and secondly, with direct invitations by Email in a public administration unit and a private enterprise. Participants filled in the baseline assessment on the study website and were then randomly forwarded to either *active-online.ch* or an interactive website for sun-protective behavior. After six weeks and six month study participants are invited by Email to fill in the follow-up assessments on the study website.

**Results:** In the six month before *active-online.ch* was officially launched, an average of 1300 visits to a prior version of the website were registered every month. On April 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, about 4000 visits per day were counted, then within two weeks the number leveled off to an average of about 300 per day (Swiss population: 7 millions).

In the feasibility study, 1240 visits on the study website were counted after the five advertisements had been published, resulting in 204 complete sets of baseline data. 62.7% of these participants were females, 72.1% were between 30 and 60 years old, 60% were not physically active on a regular basis and 60% intended to become more active. 31% were occasional or regular smokers and 85% rated their general health as good or excellent. Only 9.8% of the participants refrained from giving their Email-address. Participation rates and participants' characteristics of the direct Email recruitment and results of the six week follow-up assessment will be presented.

**Discussion:** A considerable number of people visited the website *active-online.ch* even one month after the media communiqué. For a successful long term population wide dissemination, different communication channels, collaborations with partners from the IT sector and other forms of proactive recruitment will be important.

It is feasible to conduct an internet-based randomized controlled trial. The target population of *active-online.ch* can be reached with a multimedia recruitment strategy for a "health study". For a full scale randomized controlled trial to assess the effectiveness of the program, the cost effective recruitment of a sufficient number of participants will be a key issue.

**Acknowledgements:** The project *active-online.ch* was funded by Health Promotion Switzerland, the Federal Office of Sports, the Swiss Accident Insurance, Qualitop and «Allez hop!». The Federal Council of Sports contributed to the feasibility study for the randomized controlled trial.