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Identifying important components for life style changes using an online complex e-health intervention in general practice – a qualitative interview study

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Background and Aims: In a prospective pilot study we recently found a 7.0 kg mean weight loss within a 20 month- intervention-period using an online complex e-health approach in general practice. In order to tailor a randomized controlled trial testing an online platform with App technology, accelerometers etc. we conducted a qualitative interview study to identify important determinants for weight loss management using digital solutions by exploring: 1. What is the experience using supportive e-health solutions offered in relation to healthier life style? 2. What are the incitements and barriers for personal life style changes in general and when using e-health solutions?

Method: Qualitative, semi structured, individual interviews with patients in a general practice setting in the Region of Southern Denmark. Participants comprised ten overweight patients who had previously used an online complex Internet e-health intervention.

Results: All but one of the participants used smartphones, and the last one used a tablet. Five years after the initial intervention they all still used Internet and/or apps for benefitting their health. Everyone looked up recipes, some had joined weight loss Facebook groups and some used an app service monitoring their physical activity. The main themes for incitements were life events in closer family, the establishment of support and a trustworthy relationship to health professionals, and supportive peers, and ways to monitor the behavioral change with nudging from a reference person. The primary barriers were self-inflicted obstacles, experience of lack of self-efficacy and ways to keep up appearances when discussing personal health issues with peers. Knowledge was not an issue.

Conclusion: The major findings were that many of the important determinants for behavioral change addressed by the participants are supported online. E-health solutions can support healthy living, but further investigations are needed to establish e-health solutions that can be used in general practice.