Commentary: Stairway to health

Ross Andersen

This paper contributes to the expanding body of work examining point of decision making and physical activity promotion. Consistent with the current public health recommendations for physical activity, individuals should be encouraged to accumulate physical activity throughout the day. Accumulating short bouts of activity throughout the day (Lifestyle Activity) may lead to the accrual of suggested levels of energy expenditure. Lifestyle activity has been shown to enhance fitness, improve cardiovascular risk profiles, and help with weight management. One opportunity for accumulating appropriate levels of physical activity, is to encourage stair use in lieu of riding escalators, moving walkways, or elevators.

In his classic paper Brownell et al. showed that a sign placed between stairs and an escalator could successfully encourage commuters to walk up the stairs instead of riding the escalator in an urban subway station. Since then, there have been several other studies, which have found that signs could be used to promote stair use in malls, health care facilities, campuses, and worksites.

In the investigation presented in this issue of the Journal, there was no effect of the intervention on stair climbing and baseline rates (0.4%) were much lower than previous studies in Western populations (5.4%). However, a small increase in walking up the travelator, which was restricted to the Asian population (OR = 1.12), confirmed that the intervention materials could alter behaviour. This intervention showed that a Chinese sign could promote climbing in the Asian population but not in non-Asians. This confirms that a ‘one size fits all’ sign will not effectively encourage increased stair use in all populations when used in public areas. These data also demonstrate the importance of culturally tailored messages in promoting healthy behaviours. To be effective, health promotion materials must address the needs of the audience that they are intended to reach. Those messages that are made relevant will be more effective than those that are not.

We found that a generic sign encouraging stair climbing for health reasons with a cartoon character was effective in increasing stair use for Caucasian shoppers but not for African Americans. In a follow-up study, we conducted several focus groups with African American men and women to help us design a sign to promote stair use among African American commuters. Members of these focus groups helped us create a ‘culturally appropriate’ sign, which featured a fit African American woman climbing the stairs with the message ‘No time for exercise? Try the Stairs!’. This new sign led to significant increases in stair use among overweight and non-overweight, African American men and women in an urban setting.

Baseline rates of stair climbing were alarmingly low in this population as well. Strategies are clearly needed to promote increases in incidental activity among those who ride the travelator. Sedentism has become a serious health threat in most industrialized countries around the world. Appropriate posters placed at a point of choice may lead to small changes in stair use, which magnified over time could lead to overall health benefits for the population. In addition, health messages such as this may raise awareness about the importance of regular activity in those who may not be ready to increase their activity at this time.

References


Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, 5501 Hopkins Bayview Circle, Suite 1B:84, Baltimore, MD 21224, USA.
E-mail: andersen@jhmi.edu