

SMOKING AS A MECHANISM FOR WEIGHT LOSS AMONG FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Smoking is associated with dieting, body image, weight loss behaviors, and is highly correlated with unhealthy methods of weight loss. Girls who used unhealthy weight loss methods were more likely to initiate cigarette use, instead of just thinking about it (Tomeo et al, 1999). This study was conducted to shed new light on this behavior among adolescent females and better understand the relationship between body image, diet, and smoking. In order to understand why adolescents, females in particular, choose unhealthy alternatives such as smoking as a way of losing weight, it is first important to understand their perceived body image. In a survey of high school students, "over 25% reported that they were overweight and among these students over 75% had goals of weight loss" (Felts, 1996). Several studies have determined that there is a significant relationship between weight loss and smoking in female adolescents (Tomeo, 1994). Bridging the gap, identifying the relationship between weight loss/body issues and tobacco use is a key main focus of this study.

METHODS

Using a snowball sample of recent high school graduates, we conducted an interview project of 18-19 year old females. The interviewees were asked to select a public place comfortable and close to them where they were willing to be interviewed face-to-face. The interviews were recorded for transcribing purposes after the participant read and signed the informed consent. Interview questions focused on general behavior change, substance use, body image, sexual activity, technology and demographic information. Questions related to general behavior change focused on the interviewees' ability to change as well as probed for examples of life changes. Tobacco, alcohol and other substances were covered with various questions about substance use including trial and usage habits. Questions relating to tobacco focused specifically on trial of cigars, smokeless tobacco and cigarettes, friends or family that smoked and if applicable individual reasons for smoking initiation and reasons for smoking initiation among other female peers. There were several questions relating to body image including exercise behaviors and weight perception. Interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes each, and participants agreed to follow-up in approximately one year.

For the one year follow-up 12 of the 16 participants were interviewed (n=12). The results presented reflect attitudes and beliefs of the 12 participants that were interviewed during the initial interview and the follow-up.

This project was approved by the University of Florida Behavioral/Nonmedical Institutional Review.

Do you think smoking is an effective way to manage weight?

Responses (Quotes)

"...I don't really know...maybe it is because definitely when I was smoking cigarettes regularly sometimes I would be hungry and whenever I didn't have change in my pocket or whatever I would smoke a cigarette whereas now I am hungry I would go home and get my wallet to go eat so maybe, but not so much"

"...I never really purposefully smoked to lose weight, but I definitely...people told me that it helped, that was in the back of my mind I guess. I am not even sure if that is true"

"...sure, it makes you smoke instead of eat"

"...it might be effective short-term, I don't think it's healthy"

RESULTS

- Of the twelve participants interviewed at baseline, one-third of the participants had tried cigarettes (n=4, 33.33%) and one respondent (8.33%) was a current smoker. At follow-up half of the respondents had tried cigarettes (n=6, 50%) and one third of the respondents were now current smokers (n=4, 33.33%).

- Of the participants interviewed about smoking as an effective weight loss method at baseline, 100% of the participants (n=9) felt that this method of weight loss was ineffective. At follow-up two individuals thought smoking was effective in achieving weight loss (16.67%), however one participant was indecisive and reported being unsure of the effect smoking has on achieving desired weight loss (8.33%).

- It is also important to note that only one individual at baseline reported actually using smoking as a mechanism to lose weight (8.33%) when compared to no individuals at follow-up that reported smoking as a mechanism for weight loss.

- Three of the participants reported knowing an individual/individuals that used smoking as a means to lose weight (25%). At follow-up, this percentage increased with one-third of the participants (n=4, 33.33%) reporting knowing individuals that utilized smoking as a method of weight loss.

CONCLUSIONS

There was an increase in participants who tried cigarettes, current smokers and knew individuals that used smoking as a mechanism for weight loss. It is also important to note that there seemed to be a relationship between knowing an individual who utilized smoking as a mechanism for weight loss at baseline and current cigarette use and wanting to lose weight. There appears to be a relationship between consciously coming to the realization that one is using smoking as a mechanism for weight loss versus unconsciously using this methodology because of feelings about body weight and body image. Body image, dieting, and unhealthy dieting behaviors are all related to the development of adolescent smoking as a method of weight loss. These factors are essential in understanding weight loss methods in adolescents. Understanding the relationship between cigarette use and body image, and the resulting decision to utilize cigarette use as a method of weight loss is essential in providing solutions to this problem.

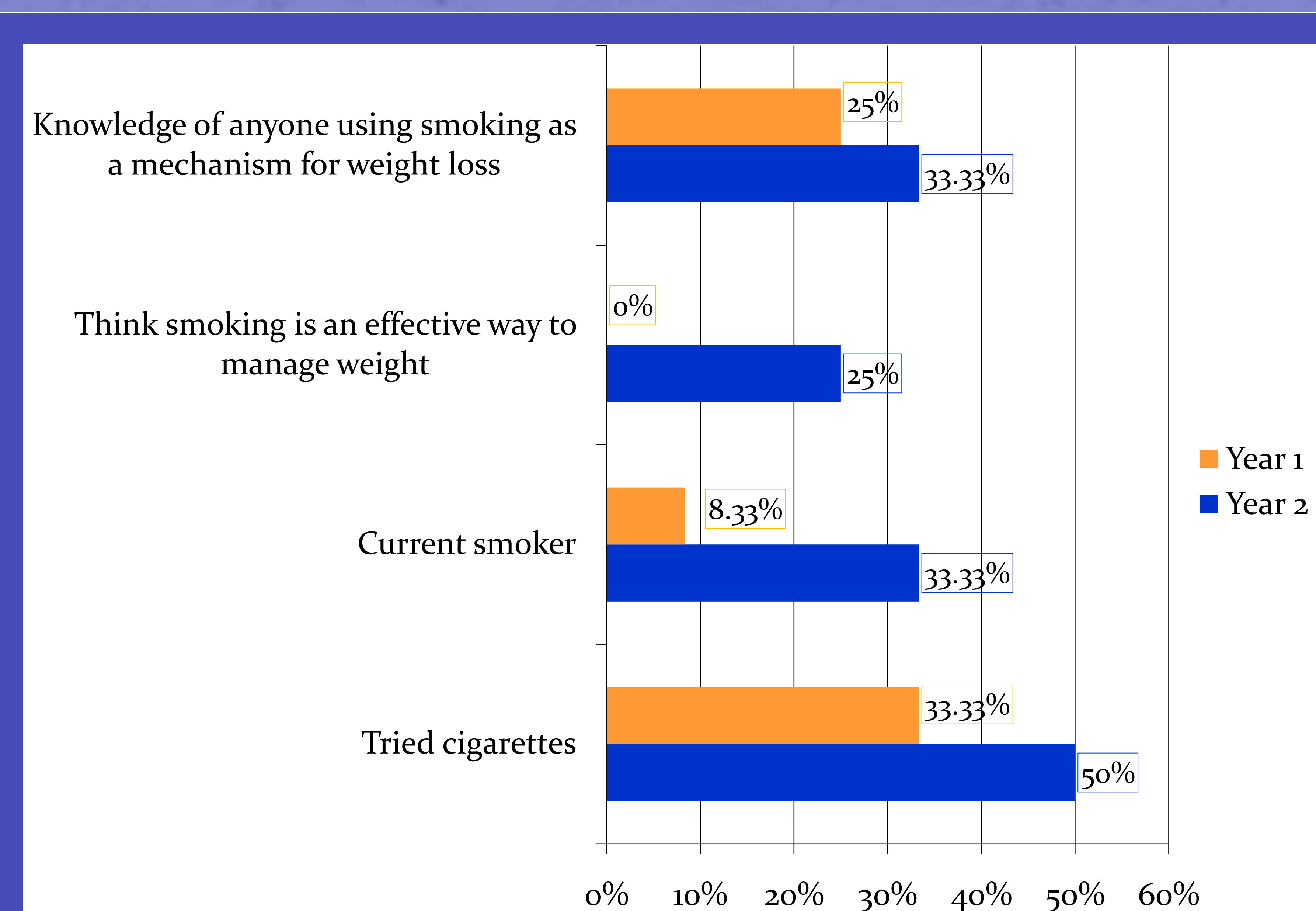


Figure 1. Tobacco responses (n=12)