



## Local Health Departments' Use of Twitter

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Melissa Wilson] Hi. I'm Melissa Wilson for *Preventing Chronic Disease*. Joining me by phone today is Dr. Jenine Harris from the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Harris is the author of an article entitled *Local Health Department Use of Twitter to Disseminate Diabetes Information* published in the May 2, 2013 issue of *Preventing Chronic Disease*. Thank you for joining us, Dr. Harris.

[Dr. Jenine Harris] Thank you for having me.

[Melissa Wilson] Dr. Harris, describe your study for our listeners.

[Dr. Jenine Harris] Sure. Local health departments provide an essential service to their constituents by informing them and educating them about health. And given that a huge proportion of these constituents are probably using Twitter and Facebook, we were interested in whether and how local health departments had picked up on this and were also starting to use Twitter and Facebook to do some of this informing. So, we chose diabetes because people living with diabetes are already pretty active online, so we thought that would be a good place to start. So what we did was, we collected all the tweets about diabetes from local health departments nationwide who were using Twitter, and we examined them for themes. We looked at whether there was more tweeting in jurisdictions with more diabetes and a few other things.

[Melissa Wilson] And what did you find?

[Dr. Jenine Harris] We found that about half of local health departments on Twitter are tweeting about diabetes and mostly what they're tweeting about are the health risks associated with diabetes. One thing that sort of surprised us was that there was really no difference in the diabetes rates in jurisdictions where health departments were tweeting about diabetes compared to where they weren't, so the tweeting didn't seem to be related to the local diabetes rates. But we did find that local health departments doing other sorts of diabetes programming, like nutrition programs and physical activity programs, were more likely to be tweeting about diabetes maybe in support of those programs.

[Melissa Wilson] Why do you think using social media like Twitter is important to public health?

[Dr. Jenine Harris] Well, I think we have about 150 million Twitter accounts in the U.S., so it's really very widely used. And it's really used across most segments of the population, so of those people who have Internet access, there's really no difference in social media use by education and income and race, so it can reach a lot of people. There's also some evidence that is starting to build that social media campaigns that promote very specific small behavior changes are successful. So, so this is a tool that could potentially be pretty cost effective since Twitter is

basically (a) free and effective way to reach a lot of people and promote small behavior changes. So I think it really has a potential to have a high sort of return on investment, a health return on investment, which is really important these days with all our limited resources.

[Melissa Wilson] What suggestions do you have for health departments that may be thinking about using Twitter as part of their public health education strategy?

[Dr. Jenine Harris] So, from what we've seen so far, it's really the health departments that tweet more often that are the ones that tend to gain followers. So, if a health department wants to use this tool to reach their constituents, they should plan to tweet on a regular basis in order to attract more followers. I would also urge health departments that are adopting Twitter to check out what their peers are doing. There are more than 200 local health departments on Twitter that they could take a look at, and I would also say take a look at a couple of the success stories that I mentioned before. Twitter campaigns seem to work best when they are promoting small and specific changes in health behaviors. So, for example, a local health department doing obesity programming might wish to send out small and specific tips to promote healthy eating or exercise to their constituents.

[Melissa Wilson] Thank you for joining us today, Dr. Harris. You can read Dr. Harris's article at [cdc.gov/pcd](http://cdc.gov/pcd).

*[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDCINFO.*