

Guidelines for establishing healthy eating peer support groups or programs

1. Get community input in developing the peer support group or program.

Community professionals and members of the target population should be involved in the development of the group (e.g., who should be recruited and what are the best ways to recruit these members). Community professionals and members of the target population should be involved in the development of the nutrition education messages and the topics to be covered.

2. Develop co-leadership between community professional(s) and the target population.

Peer support groups or programs are dependent upon balancing the leadership between the professionals and the participants. Identify a nutrition professional who will work well with participants. Identify an individual from the target population who has an interest in healthy eating or healthy weight and can help with planning, recruiting other members and providing links to the larger community. The peer facilitator will work closely with the nutrition professional to conduct the peer support groups.

3. Determine ideal meeting location, frequency of meetings and interval between sessions (e.g., every week, twice a week, twice a month, etc.)

An ideal meeting place for a peer support group is one that is easily accessible, comfortable, can provide space for childcare if needed, and have cooking facilities available. Head Start sites and schools participating in the MNN Maine-ly Nutrition Project are logical meeting centers.

4. Recruit Members

Recruit members using methods that make sense in your community and for your organization. Examples may be putting up posters advertising the healthy eating support group in areas where the target audience will see them; word of mouth; or announcements through Head Start, WIC, etc.

Efforts should be made to recruit members who would benefit most from a peer support group (e.g., those with the risk factors of poor diet or unhealthy weight or lack of social support for healthy eating).

In some cases, peer groups work best when members are of the same gender, age range, socioeconomic status, and readiness or willingness to make improvements in their eating. Planners should explore what will work best in their community.

5. Decide on Content of Sessions and Format

One of the hallmarks of facilitated group discussion is that participants have some say as to what topics are discussed so that material is relevant to them.

Peer support programs should be coordinated with other community health and nutrition programs to enhance, complement, and support information potential group members may already be receiving from other community programs.

Other things to think about regarding format is whether the group will have a special session where members can bring family and friends, whether members will be encouraged to support one another outside of the group, and what ground rules will be developed for the group.