



**Ditch your couch-potato friends if you want to be healthy**

# Fit mates key to flab fight

**Elissa Doherty**

**WANT to fight the flab?**

Ditch your couch-potato friends and hang out with carrot munchers, because being healthy could be contagious.

A Deakin University study has found women tend to mimic the eating and exercise behaviours of people around them.

Researchers at the Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research surveyed more than 3500 Victorian women, and found healthy participants were most likely to be surrounded by health-conscious peers.

**'We found that the women who spent time around healthy peers**

**were more likely to also eat well and exercise' - Dr KYLIE BALL**

Senior research fellow Dr Kylie Ball said it showed healthy living may be contagious. "Our study considered the impact of social norms on physical activity and eating behaviours, including consumption of fast food, soft drink and fruit and vegetables," she said.

"We found that women who spent time around healthy peers were more likely to also eat well and exercise ... suggesting that healthy living could well be contagious."

Equally, she said women with friends and families leading sedentary lifestyles and gorging on fast food were less likely to be healthy.

Dr Ball said one of the reasons could be that people tend to flock to like-minded people. But she also said people were likely to adopt what they saw as social norms.

"Women who see others engaging in particular physical activity or eating behaviours may view these as normal or socially desirable and may adopt them due to a positive attitude about the behaviours, a shared belief in their value or a strong urge to fit in," she said.

The study, *Is Healthy Behaviour Contagious? Associations of Social Norms with*

*Physical Activity and Healthy Eating*, has been published in the *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity*.

The findings could be used to pave the way for intervention strategies aimed at modifying social norms, Dr Ball said.

"We have an opportunity to help people challenge the social norms that lead them down an unhealthy path and create a new, healthier, definition of normal," she said.

Clinical psychologist Dr Vanda Brink said seeing peers lead healthy lives was likely to give people more motivation to follow suit.

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Fit for life: Sarah Hall and Alice Carter running around the Tan yesterday. Picture: MIKE KEATING

## BEST FRIENDS FOR FITNESS

- 1** They do not eat junk food more than once a week
- 2** They do not drink soft drink more than once a week
- 3** They often eat healthy meals when they go out
- 4** They walk or do other exercise most days of the week
- 5** They exercise for at least 30 minutes per session
- 6** They do not spend long sitting at a computer or TV