

A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF UNHEALTHY EATING HABITS ON UNDERGRADUATES IN TERMS OF HEALTH STATUS, STUDIES AND LIVING COST

Group

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INTRODUCTION

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is significant in promoting health promotion and preventing disease because this is a period where individuals are matured to think independently and choose their lifestyle; whether to lead a healthy or unhealthy lifestyle. Moreover, this particular group of people tend to develop unhealthy eating habits, substance abuse, and have low physical activity level during this particular period of time (Nelson et al., 2008). The best and most potential targets for promoting a healthy lifestyle are university students because this may help reduce the risks of lifestyle-related disorders in the long run (von Bothmer & Fridlund, 2005). Ironically, this target population tend to be neglected and is an overlooked area of research as compared to children and adults (Herrera et al., 2003; Nelson et al., 2008, Moye et al., 2009). The purpose of this study is to obtain preliminary understanding of students' perception on the effects of unhealthy eating habits on undergraduates in terms of health status, studies and living cost. This study provides recent data on the eating behaviours and perception among students in University of Malaya, which could provide insights for the development of future intervention and nutrition education programmes that aim to improve the nutritional status of university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Examples of major public health concerns are obesity and poor eating habits, especially among adolescents who are experiencing transition into university life (Nelson et al., 2008). University students tend to experience stress in university life and this may have a negative implication on their diet (Mikolajczyk, El Ansari & Maxwell, 2009). Most university students make their own food choices (Satalic, Baric & Keser, 2007), so proper guidance is needed in this matter because lack of skills and guidance could influence their eating behaviours. They may exhibit unhealthy eating behaviours due to the high cost of healthy foods and the ease of availability of fast food.

Previous studies have shown that university students often failed to meet the recommended intakes for fruits and vegetables (Huang et al., 2003; Moy et al., 2009), had frequent snacking habits of high fat and calorie dense food (Kremmyda et al., 2008; Yahia et al., 2008), tended to skip meals especially breakfast, and had higher frequency of fast food consumption (Alizadeh & Ghabili, 2008). In addition, a high proportion of university students, for example, Japanese (Shimbo et al., 2004), Turkish (Sanlier & Unusan, 2007), and Croatians (Satalic et al., 2007) failed to meet the recommended intakes for most of the macro- and micro-nutrients.

DISCUSSION

An online survey has been conducted to study students' perception of food available at University of Malaya as the chosen setting, the effects of unhealthy eating habits on their general health and studies, and the availability of healthy food on campus. 11 questions were formulated and answered by 100 respondents. Responses were rated from

'1' as strongly disagree and '5' as strongly agree.

Figure 1 summarises the findings where the data were analysed and demonstrated with different colours. Students' opinion on the sufficiency of healthy food options on campus was evaluated. 36% (36 respondents) of the responses showed that they were neutral, while 28% (28 respondents) were of the opinion that the food available on campus is not healthy, 19% (19 respondents) agree that there is sufficient healthy food, 15% (15 respondents) strongly disagree that there are sufficient healthy food options in their campus. A minority of 2% (2 respondents) strongly agrees that there are sufficient healthy food options. From this, a majority of the respondents leaned towards the scale that the healthy food options in the university are insufficient.

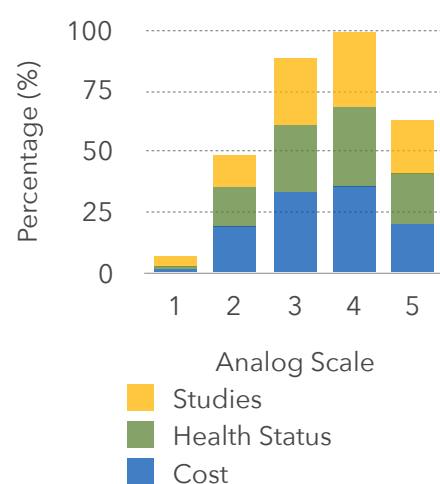


Figure 1: A bar chart on students' perceptions towards the effects of unhealthy eating on living cost, health status and studies

Generally, students' opinion on the food was assessed economically wise. 41% (41 respondents) were of a neutral stance on the cost of food in the chosen setting. 27% (27 respondents) agree that food sold in the chosen setting is expensive. 15% (15 respondents) strongly agreed that food available in the chosen setting is pricey, while 15 out of 100 respondents disagree that the food in the chosen setting is costly. A minority of 2% (2 respondents) strongly disagrees that the

food sold in the chosen setting is expensive. In conclusion, most of the respondents agree that the food available in the chosen setting is not economical.

A majority of 30 out of 100 respondents agree that they often felt sleepy or slept in class due to unhealthy eating. 28% (28 respondents) are neutral and does not correlate with drowsiness in the classroom or lecture halls and unhealthy eating. 27% (27 respondents) agreed strongly that tiredness during lectures was due to unhealthy eating habits. In the meantime, 11% (11 respondents) of the responses does not agree that lassitude during lectures was linked to unhealthy diet. The remaining 4% (4 respondents) strongly disagree that fatigue experienced during lectures had any relations to unhealthy eating. Therefore, a greater part of the respondents was homogeneous that there is a connection between drowsiness in lectures or classes and unhealthy eating habits.

Last but not least, 34 out of 100 respondents concur that unhealthy eating habits affect their studies. 27% (27 respondents) of the responses were of a neutral stance on the effect of unhealthy eating towards academic performances. 22% (22 respondents) agreed strongly that academic performances were affected by unhealthy diet. While 13% (13 respondents) does not concur that unhealthy eating affects their studies. The remaining 4% (4 respondents) were of the opinion that unhealthy diet does not influence academic performances at all. Thus, overall, most of the respondents agreed that unhealthy eating habits affect studies.

The strengths of this study are it uses analog scale from 1 to 5, instead of 'Yes' or 'No' responses. This gives respondents more choice to rate their perceptions on the questions asked in the questionnaire. The data was obtained from 100 respondents, which is suffice to represent the whole population in University of Malaya. However, a higher number of

respondents should be obtained in future research.

The weaknesses of this study are the insufficiency of data collected from respondents such as socio-demography, anthropometry and psychosocial factors. These variables should be considered in futures studies for a more comprehensive and accurate study. The data was also not analysed using statistical analysis. Statistical analysis would show whether the findings are significant or not. This helps to strengthen the findings of the research.

CONCLUSION

The majority of respondents admit to practising unhealthy eating habits in their life. The undergraduates also concur that their unhealthy diets have led to several problems from the aspect of health, studies & living cost. As a solution, an intervention was proposed by our group to create a UM Health Boost Card which can provide discounts at selected outlets up to 20%. Hence, making healthy food cheaper, more accessible, and indirectly affect a student's choice to make a healthier diet decision.

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