EATING HABITS OF STUDENTS IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WITH REGARD TO HEALTHY FOOD

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ABSTRACT

We all know that at the college and university level, students are bound to have an unhealthy diet as most of them move out from their native home and start living outside. Responsibility of purchasing and preparing good healthy food was negligible. With the students' eating habits, we have found that most of them do consider themselves having healthy food but as per the survey done, in both private and government colleges and university in Himachal Pradesh (India) who were from India and abroad, it was discovered that most of the students were either just having their regular rice and lentils daily or always skipped a meal a day. Further, it was found that every student, did at least eat junk food once a day and ate fresh fruits and vegetables only sometimes in a week. The students were concerned about their physical appearance; hence they either skipped a meal or did regular exercise but without proper dietary habits.

Key words: Eating habits, Healthy food, University, College, Physical appearance, Dietary Habits.

INTRODUCTION

Every individual who consume healthy foods and adopt a healthy diet are less likely to suffer from heart disease, diabetes and other chronic diseases. Food habits, in general are culture specific, but in the last few decades dynamic changes have occurred due to the fast growing economy. A shift from the traditional to modern technologies, globalization, industrialization, constant travels across the world, evolving tastes and increased demands for “fast” and processed foods throughout the country. It is often thought that Indians are eating better over the years—including more dairy products, eggs and meat, fruits and vegetables in their diet but of recent survey it showed that Indian food habits have changed but their nutritional level intake was the same. People are eating less cereal and replacing them with more fat and snacks, beverages and other processed foods. The recommended calorie intake for Indians set by the National Institute of Nutrition, ICMR, is 2,320 Kcal per day for a man aged between 18-29 years, weighing 60kg and doing sedentary work. The share of items like fruits and vegetables, dairy products and eggs, meat and fish was about 9% in 1993-94 which marginally changed to about 9.6% in 2011-12. The only food item that has seen a substantial jump in intake is classified as ‘others’ in the survey and consists of
various hot and cold beverages, processed foods like chips, biscuits and snacks which shows a 5.6% in 1993-94 and increased to about 9% in 2011-122.

Changes in lifestyle and loss of the family tradition of eating together trigger the popularity of fast foods among young people. The shift from healthy, homemade food to more convenient, longer lasting fast foods combined with a sedentary lifestyle has resulted in global fattening and related health complications3.

The main objective of this study is

- To evaluate and analyze what students within the ages of 18-25 both male and female, at the college and university level consider healthy food and what actually they are having.
- Why they had what they had?
- How can they improve their eating habits? With the outcome of this only 34% of the students had proper meals daily while the rest either skipped a meal or found fast food more convenient and it was seen that 83% considered themselves having healthy food.

METHODOLOGY

This paper was designed as a case study and a questionnaire survey was done for collecting the primary data. The survey was undertaken in both private and government colleges and universities of Himachal Pradesh. A total number of 200 randomly selected students both from India and abroad was taken as a sample through questionnaire method and schedule method. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data regarding age, sex, nationality, money spent per day, meal patterns, fast food consumption on an average per day, reasons why they ate outside, their consideration of a healthy food and their concern for their health.

RESULTS

Out of 200 students, 20% students were living with parents, 32% either stayed at hostels or paying guests and the rest 48% stayed in groups or alone. Students who stayed with their parents strongly agreed that they were having healthy food. But for those who stayed at paying guests, in groups or alone showed that they had unhealthy food and moreover skipped a meal a day, breakfast being the most prominent (Fig. 1). The figure below shows that only 24% of the students had proper breakfast, 34% lunch daily and around 42% of them had dinner daily.
Students who are from abroad and who had regular breakfast had only bread and butter or cereals, for the students who were living with parents or in hostels had mainly parantha, puri and bhaji, which was not sufficient for a day to start.

Globalization and urbanization have greatly affected one’s eating habits and forced many people to consume fancy and high calorie fast foods, popularly known as “Junk foods”\(^4\). In a day, 63% of the students strongly agreed that they had junk food—pizza, burger, soft beverages and tit-bits—at least once on an average per day and spent from 100 to 200 INR a day. Most of the students came from middle class families and considered vegetables and fruits were also part of their consumption however because it’s expensive, they cannot afford to have it daily. About 90% of the students are concerned about their physical appearance hence, they either carried out daily exercises or they just skipped a meal or two to get that desirable look.

With the growing technology, students are more attracted to unhealthy junk food through advertisements, social networking sites and quick and easy meal which makes them have the habit of eating out. It was discovered that 56% of the students ate out as it was convenient for them, quick and easy meal. 34% believed that eating out is a way of socializing with friends and 10% just wanted to experiment with food (Figure 2).
Figure 2: Percentage showing why the students ate out.

The food outlets in the colleges and universities also had menus which were mainly high in fat content and calories like pizza, burger, Chinese noodles, cheesy sandwiches, pastries and so on and were usually accompanied by soft beverages. This accounts for a completely unhealthy diet and may lead to obesity.

It was not a surprise to see that almost 64% considered that homemade food is the healthiest food that they consumed. Figure 3 shows the students’ concept of a healthy food. For lunch or dinner they had mainly rice and lentils with rarely vegetables and meat products in the meal, which makes it not a balanced meal but just hygienic meal. Moreover, we know that we as Indians make food with lots of spices and oil, consequently we cannot sum up that the food we have at home is also healthy, abroad they eat mostly processed food consequently we cannot conclude that homemade food is the healthiest food.
DISCUSSIONS

Our study has many limitations. The data was self-reported and the study is cross-sectional.

We are creatures of habit. Overtime, we develop patterns and routines to which we become accustomed. When it comes to our diets, we develop an affinity and fondness for particular tastes, textures, combinations and volumes and even to how they make us feel afterwards. The physical nature of food incites reactions in our bodies that we get accustomed to. The survey has shown that most of the youths were more likely to have junk food or fast food since it was more convenient and quick which contains high fat, high sugar and it is highly palatable. It is evident that in this generation, youths are more concerned with their physical appearance; hence to get that attractive look they either skipped a meal or did regular exercise but without proper dietary habits.

Regular breakfast skipping has been reported to be associated with generally unhealthy behaviors, such as consuming a poorer diet and having lower physical activity levels. These behaviors can result in higher body mass index (BMI) and cardio metabolic risk factors. With almost 76% students skipped breakfast the main reason being time. Breakfast should always include fresh fruits and juices, cereals, milk and crudités.

The key factors for the widely changing eating habits of students at the college and university level whether they are from India or abroad are mainly because of the advertisements through new technologies and software systems that influence the eating food habits in the minds of the students.

Figure 3: Percentage of the students’ perception of healthy food.
students. The majority of the food ads on television or any social media are always high on sugar and calories.

Most of the fast food users are well informed about the negative effects associated with fast food consumption, but they were still reported to have fast food at a regular basis without considering their health complications\textsuperscript{7}. According to the Healing Foods Pyramid created by The University Michigan Health System in 2005 and updated in 2009, emphasizes the daily consumption of fruits, vegetables, water and grains, eggs, dairy products, healthy fats and seasonings; weekly consumption of lean meat and fish; and other foods being optional\textsuperscript{9}.

Within the age of 18-25, students are more concerned about the palate and appearance and are not health conscious. Many critical illnesses may be caused due to consumption of an unhealthy food and students should make it a habit to indulge and count the intake of calories at least twice a week. To have an energetic and happy life, one should be careful of what they eat and a regular routine of exercise should be performed

CONCLUSIONS

The paper reports on the students’ food preferences and why there is a change in the eating habits attending the colleges and universities of Himachal Pradesh which comprises of both students from India and abroad. The study shows that the students have a poor healthy eating habit and the main reason being that the processed food or fast food was found to be more convenient to them since it was quick and easy. Students also had less source of capital where they cannot afford to get the fresh fruits and vegetables for consumption.

Seeing that the students are more concerned about their physical appearance therefore, it is recommended that they opt for more nutritious and balanced diet rather than skipping a meal a day or eat unhealthy food. It is the responsibility of the families and the authorities of the colleges and universities to provide adequate knowledge to the students regarding healthy food and a dietary chart. The outlets at colleges and universities should also promote more of healthy and less high fat and sugar content. Support should be given from the universities and colleges authority to ensure that the students receive and have healthy food. Moderate amounts of low-nutrient fare is seldom problematic, eating poorly for even short periods can have negative consequences. Some of the problems associated with poor eating habit can lead to poor brain function, poor exercise capabilities, insulin resistance and weight gain, indigestion and heartburn, poor sleep and mood problems. That is why to ensure a healthy diet it is advisable to include all the nutrients required and balanced.
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