

Measures of Healthful Dietary Practices of College Students.

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Purpose

The focus of this study was to identify healthful dietary practices and dietary change among undergraduate students enrolled in a land grant university.

Method

Two mailings of 97 item survey were sent to 1271 students enrolled at the University of Delaware, Fall 1995. Healthful eating practices were compared to Food Guide Pyramid recommendations, and four diet-related behaviors were assessed.

Results

A 30 percent response rate was achieved with a total of 379 responses (215 and 164 at first and second mailings, respectively). The study sample was statistically representative ($p < 0.05$) of the overall student population in terms of class status and college. However, a statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) larger number of women participated in the study relative to the proportion of women in the total student population.

Healthful practices: All healthful dietary practices were followed "sometimes" or "almost always" by at least 69% of students. They were likely to be tasting foods before salting (85%), limiting eggs (83%), and avoiding the addition of high fat gravy and sauces (80%). They also tended to regularly consume six servings of bread, cereal, and/or pasta (60%). On the negative side, those practices followed with least frequency included eating at least two servings of fruit (69%) and three servings of vegetables (68%) on a daily basis.

Overall dietary adequacy as indicated by a comparison with Food Guide Pyramid recommendations was disappointing. Although 254 students (67%) indicated they attempted to meet minimum recommendations at least "sometimes," only 10 students (3%) achieved a perfect score of 5 (met all recommendations). Ninety-four students (25%) scored 1 (met only one recommendation).

Dietary Change Score: A mean Dietary Change Score (range -3 to +3) was constructed based on whether the student reported following each dietary practice more, less, or as often since arriving at college. A positive score indicated that a healthful dietary change had been made; a negative score, a less than healthful dietary change. On an optimistic note, students were currently not adding extra fat items to foods regularly (mean score 1.21) and were asking for low fat milk varieties (0.7) more frequently. Conversely, they were less likely to eat two servings of meat/meat alternative (-1.46), three servings of vegetables (0.94) and two servings of fruit daily (-0.82). Overall scores indicated a movement away from a healthful eating practice upon arriving at college. There were no differences in the dietary change score based on gender, academic status, or dining plan option. Data support the conclusion that those who reportedly were meeting recommended food group patterns were also more likely to have adopted healthful dietary practices since arriving at college.

Conclusions

Overall dietary adequacy was disappointing. Two-thirds of the students indicated they attempted to meet minimum recommendations, only 3% were doing so. While reporting efforts to limit salt, fat, and cholesterol in their diets, the overall trend was to move away from healthful eating practices since coming to college.

Recommendations

- identify barriers and develop educational strategies that focus on "how to" establish and maintain healthful eating practices
- focus more attention on healthy food choices in campus food services
- facilitate positive change in eating practices through consumer economics and consumer health courses.

Endnotes

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