

Things are not always what they seem: perception and reality of away from home eating

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The 2005 MyPyramid Food Guidance System (FDA 2005) addresses what and how much Americans should eat, but current policy does not assist Americans in using this information in away from home venues such as restaurants, where portions are not quantified and ingredients often not disclosed. The literature is divided as to whether nutrition information in away from home settings results in healthier behavior, but knowledge improves good nutrition intentions among teens and college students (Abood, Black & Birnbaum 2004; Abood, Black & Coster 2008) though little is known of its effect on purchase or consumption behavior. College students with more knowledge about nutrition believed they ate a better diet (Kolodinsky et al. 2007) and are more confident in their ability to choose a healthy diet (Mitchell 1990).

Using a sample of college students enrolled in a University dining plan, this study investigates how nutrition information and education affect perceptions and purchase behavior in an away from home venue. The experimental design with a control group and measurements both before and after the labeling and education interventions enabled comparisons of both perceptions and purchase behavior over time and in response to the information and education intervention.

In the initial survey and baseline measure, subjects were more likely to perceive to consume the MyPyramid guidelines for any food group than to actually purchase in accordance with the guidelines for that food group. In the post-study survey, subjects' perceptions of whether they met or exceeded the MyPyramid guidelines for each food group did not change significantly from the pre-study survey. In the measure of food purchased, the experimental group was significantly more likely to meet/exceed the MyPyramid guidelines for servings of fruit and dairy at the post-study measure than the control group.

The MyPyramid system provides a framework to help Americans determine what and how much to eat. This study shows that education and point of purchase information makes a small, but measurable difference in aligning purchase habits with the MyPyramid guidelines. Overall, when it is convenient to make a change for better nutrition, students are more inclined to do so. Students who are exposed to both nutrition information and education were more likely to meet or exceed the MyPyramid guidelines for fruit and dairy but not for vegetables or whole grains. However, even those with more information and education do not eat as healthy of a diet as they believe. Perceptions of meeting MyPyramid guidelines were higher than purchase behavior for every category of food. These results suggest that providing education and information in a restaurant setting may be a valuable tool to making healthier choices, though information and education alone do not seem sufficient to result in a healthy diet.

References

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