EATING BEHAVIORS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

JOANY HERNANDEZ1, DASTAN BAMWESIGYE2, MIROSLAV HORAK1

1Department of Languages and Cultural Studies
2Department of Forest and Wood Products Economics and Policy
Mendel University in Brno
Zemedelska 1, 613 00 Brno
CZECH REPUBLIC
qqherna2@mendelu.cz

Abstract: The nutritional intake during young adulthood supports the maintenance of physical health, impacts risk for future disease, and plays a role in the prevention of excess weight gain. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (2013), Czech Republic ranks as the fattest country in Europe, based on the prevalence of obesity among adults. Around 28.7% of the adult population is considered obese, and this number is projected to rise according with the European Association for the Study of Obesity (EASO) in 2030. Currently young people’s health is receiving more attention because of alarming data regarding risk factor such obesity prevalence. Identifying people at greater risk of developing obesity is important for the development of effective public health strategies to prevent and treat excess weight gain and its associated co-morbidities. The presented study was conducted to describe food-preparation behaviors, cooking skills, resources for preparing food, and associations with diet quality among young adults from Mendel University in Brno. Finally, a number of recommendations, according to the results of this study, were formulated to foment new eating habits among the experimental sample.

Key Words: food habits, eating behaviors, young adults, buying choices, obesity, prices

INTRODUCTION

According to Osorio et al. (2002) the eating behavior is a “normal behavior related to eating habits, selecting foods that you eat; culinary preparations and quantities of ingestion”. Eating well can become a habit and so can eating poorly. Eating poorly might help develop serious diseases as obesity, malnourishment, among others. Food habits and obesity can barely be separated. The rational for that is, that the way an individual eats determines her health status. Precise food behaviors or habits, regime factors, and surrounding mechanisms may be accountable for variances in global diseases (Azevedo et al. 2016). The study further showed that an average number of deaths were preventable i.e. the deaths were the consequence of avoidable sources, comprised of suboptimal food habits with low intake of fruits and vegetable, pulses, whole grains and nuts and high quantities intake of sugar and salt.

According with the World and Health Organization 2015, the variations in worldwide food market generate opportunities for change people’s eating behaviors or habits to decrease the risk of developing various health problems as obesity. Obesity is nonstandard or disproportionate fat growth that grants a danger to one’s well-being. It is measured by the Body Mass Index (BMI). An individual with a BMI of 30 and above is normally reflected obese. Equivalent to or above 25 is measured overweight respectively. Also, overweight can be defined as an excess of weight that is more than the allowed.

Neumark-Sztainer et al. (1995), noted that eating habits and mealtime arrangements which are unhealthy in diet regularly led consistently to overweight and obese students. Their research findings suggested that school-based agendas still had the potential to contribute to main anticipation dietary challenges. The report of the Food and Agriculture Organization (2013), mentions that the Czech Republic is considered as the country with the highest percentage of obese or overweight people in Europe, 28.7%. But this number contains not just students but adults of all ages.
The hypothesis of this study is that the students of Mendel University have good understanding of eating habits and adequate knowledge about nutrition. This research assumes that they care about their eating habits and their health, so they can perform better their daily activities now and in the future.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This research was conducted with students from Mendel University in Brno, located in the region Moravia, Czech Republic. To be selected to be part of the study, the participants had to be regular undergraduate students of any degree, at least in their second year, over 18 years old. The students voluntarily participate in the study by signing an informed consent.

Their eating behaviors were determined and evaluated by a questionnaire. This questionnaire, which consisted of 37 questions, was divided into 4 blocks: overall overview, health, food habits and sugar consumption. It assessed the subjects’ frequency of eating meals and other different factors that influencing their food choices at different places.

The fulfilled questionnaires then were analyzed with Microsoft Excel.

Research Sample

This study was carried out between February to April 2016. During this period 107 students signed up, which represents around 1% of all students of Mendel University. The subjects were between 18 to 26 years old. This was from the target population who were university students at Mendel University in Brno.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study strived to get the demographic background information of the respondents in order to classify the individuals who engaged in the study. Most of the participants were women (67%) and the rest (33%) were men.

Most of the interviewed students were people between 18 and 21 years old (70%). Also, the study counted with the participation of other students from 22 to 25, and 26 to 29 and the numbers were 35, and 2 of the total number respectively.

Relative frequency of places where the students had their meals indicated Canteen 8%, home 89%, Restaurant 1%, and others 2%.

Figure 1 How often do the students prepare their own food per week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>Twice or three times</th>
<th>Four or five times</th>
<th>Six or more</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food prep.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1 above shows the frequency how often students prepared their own food at home. 11% was cooking once in a week, 29% cooking two or three times, 36% for four or five times per week, and 23% for six and more times.

Figure 2 Change of the eating habits of the students during the exam period

Figure 2 above shows the frequency the students change their eating habits during the exam period, 6% responded yes to healthier eating, 51% answered yes to less healthy eating, 43% answered no to change in their eating habits or behaviors.

Preference for low-fat products indicated that only 20% of the students prefer low fat foods. Moreover, the subjects said that they are used to read the label of the products (78%).

Figure 3 Do the students make their buying choices based on how healthy the product is or based on its price?

Figure 3 shows whether the students care about eating healthy or they prefer to eat cheap. The results showed that 37% of the students always buy healthy products, 55% of them sometimes chooses healthy products but this decision depends on the price of the product, whereas 3% of sample responded that considered price vital, and 5% answered that they do not think that this is an important factor to make their decision.
The responses on the consumption of sweet beverages whose percentage frequencies are 34% for once and never, 21% for two or three times, 2% for four or five and 9% for six or more times. The investigation results further indicate the favorite alcoholic drinks.

The results also show that only 6% of the responses does not drink alcohol while the other 94% does.

DISCUSSION

Heather and Theresa (2013) mentioned that features such as social surroundings, plus various socioeconomic and sociocultural aspects such as parents’ training, time restraints, and culture influence peoples’ eating habits. This research found out that the significant percentage of students eat and prepare their meals at home. These results are positive because the subjects know the ingredients as its quantities and their quality and plan what they eat, as well as save money.

The report of the National Obesity forum (2016) mentioned that the people’s preference for low/fat and low cholesterol foods is originating in a health crisis. Basically, this report mentioned that the sugar and packages labeled as “low-fat”, “light” and “low cholesterol” removed the fat from the food and often is replaced with sugar or salt to make up the lost flavor which makes the people gain weight. This investigation demonstrates that the subjects are not used to consume low-fat products (80%) and they might know the consequences of eating high fat products/foods, which is equally illustrated by the high number of subjects (78%) who constantly read the labels on food products.

Kurubaran et al. (2012) established that university students ate healthy foods but they however argued that such eating habits can change due to stressful events. This same situation can as well be confirmed in this research results as the frequency of the students that changed their eating habits because of stressful events such as examination periods made students to eat less healthy food is quite high (more than 50%).

Students responded on purchasing choices showed that 63% of them not always choose the healthy product option. Several studies (Pitt and Rosenzweig 1984, Magnusson et al. 2003, Taylor et al. 2005), in their various investigations show that price affects the choice of food consumed by the people in their different environments.

Later, Andreyeva et al. (2010), further stress that approximating price/value affects the substitutions from healthy to unhealthy foods and price sensitivity amongst risky populations. They equally suggested that fluctuating food prices hence create changes in diets. It is significant to comprehend how price variations affect demand for several foods. This could also be supported by the numerous studies (Stiglitz 2013). He contended that diverse commodities in the marketplace are subjective to prices than any other aspects such as availability of substitutes amongst other.

The responses on the consuming of sweet drinks whose proportion incidences is 66% for once or more times a week. These results are alarming because they not only consume per week sugary drinks, which are rich in free sugar; but also, other sugary products as chocolates, cookies, etc. and these just increased they daily sugar intake. Also, 94% of the responders consume alcohol regularly. According with the World Health Organization (WHO), the daily intake of free sugars should be less than 10% of the total energy intake. The same report mentioned a further reduction to below 5% or roughly 25 grams (6 teaspoons) per day would provide additional health benefits.

The consumption of too many sugary products which compose most sweet drinks, and alcoholic beverages, is likely to cause obesity or overweight. According with the European Health report in 2015, Czech Republic is the fifth country with prevalence for overweight and obesity in Europe. Also, it is mentioned in the report that the high amount of deaths were the result of preventable causes, which included suboptimal food habits with low eating of fruits and vegetables, pulses, whole grains and nuts rather high quantities intake of sugar and salt.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to know which food habits the university students have. This research concludes that although they are used to read the labels of the products which they buy, everything is pointing that they do not have enough of information about what they should eat: they
drink sweetened soft drinks containing more sugar than their daily need is. Also, they are used to drink alcohol as part of their diet. A representative part of the participants does not always choose the healthy option or they are not concerned about what they eat.

Also, they have the tendency to change their food habits with academic stress situations, to even less healthy, especially during the exam period. This irregular food habit should be avoided, because could bring consequences related with malnutrition, either deficit or excess, in this very critical period.

The study also concludes that price has a great impact on the choice of healthy foods although other factors such as social and environmental factors were vital in the determinants of eating habits amongst students. It can also be concluded that the economic situation may be a condition to carry out a convenient feed, which might limit the selection of certain types of food and consequently in the impossibility to maintain healthy eating behaviors.

Even in this small sample of students, roughly 60% of the participants are not interested about what they eat. And although they might have an adequate knowledge about nutrition they do not use it in practice. Because of this, they are at risk of becoming overweight and obese in the future. This situation is alarming and this study recommends to conduct a future research with broadened scope and larger representative sample size, which should include not only the students but also the teachers. Moreover, this research recommends that the university should prepare some action plan to educate its students about nutrition and eating habits and teach them how to use this knowledge in practice. Because a healthier population brings many advantages to the country. People are more motivated, more productive and the state can spare some money on health care.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This article contains results from the research project called “The Influence of High Sugar Intake on Cognitive Functions of University Students” supported by Internal Grant Agency, FRDIS MENDELU, ID: 2016/15

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