

STUDENTS' EATING HABITS: A CASE STUDY

PLOSCUȚANU GABRIELA,

Dr., university lecturer,

"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania

e-mail: gabilenco@yahoo.com

Abstract. *Food habits play an important role in maintaining the level of proper nutrition in individuals at all ages. The food consumption habits and dietary intakes of university students across the globe seem to be characterized by unhealthy choices. Studying eating habits can aid in the design of specific measures that reduce the negative effects of an unhealthy diet on health. In this context, the aim of the present study was to examine the eating habits of students. The study design was a cross-sectional survey conducted at the "Dunarea de Jos" Galati University on 104 students from the Faculty of Food Science and Engineering and Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. Students were asked to fill out a self-reported questionnaire that included questions on their eating, drinking and smoking habits. Eating habits of the students showed that the majority (75%) reported taking meals irregularly. Intake of green, red or yellow colored vegetables and fruits was common among students (more than fifty percent). Alcohol intake were common among students. Results indicate that university students would benefit from a nutrition and health promotion program and to improve students' eating habits.*

Keywords: *questionnaire, students, food habits, health*

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Introduction

The years spent at the university represent a critical period that is able to influence both the quality of lifestyle and eating habits of the subsequent adulthood and, also, on long-term, the health of the individuals.[1]

Specifically, the university population is divided into two categories, those who continue to live with their parents and those that are attending universities far from their usual residence that are forced to live away from home. For both, the beginning of the university matches with more freedom and independence and is often the first time that young people assume the responsibility to choose and prepare foods.[2]

Past reports revealed that the transition to the independent living, in university, is characterized by an elevated consumption of fast food, snacks and meat as well as a reduced intake of fruits, vegetables, and whole wheat cereal products. Furthermore, a high prevalence of other health behaviors of concern, such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and physical inactivity, has been reported.[3, 4]

The major dietary-related influences include: the food environment, campus environment, religion and individual preferences. Additionally, the consequences of dietary changes were associated with undesirable health outcomes including weight gain, increased blood glucose levels, increased cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, and mental problems.[5]

The aim of the present work was to analyze the eating habits of a group of undergraduate university students.

Material and method

In march 2018 a questionnaire was administered on a sample of 104 students (34% male and 66% female), aged between 19 and 23 years, randomly selected from Faculty of Food Science and Engineering and Faculty of Economics and Business Administration ("Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati).

Recruited students were asked to fill out a questionnaire (10 questions) related to their general health, eating and drinking habits. The questionnaire was adopted from a previously published study where authors have standardized its use among university students (Sakamaki, *et al.*, 2005).[6]

Results and discussion

The majority of students (75%) eat meals irregularly (Figure 1-a). The reason may be their busy schedules and dislocated places of lectures.

Breakfast consumption has been shown to be an important indicator of a healthy lifestyle. More than half of students eat breakfast daily (51%) or three to four times per week (25%) (Figure 1-b). The same results were obtained among students from Spain.[7] Breakfast is the most frequently skipped among Croatian student's.[8]



Figure 1. The answer to the questions

"Do you take your meals regularly?" (a) and "Do you take breakfast?" (b)

The recommended number of daily meals is three to five. At question "How many times do you eat meals except snacks?" one can see that the majority of respondents do not meet this condition, food intakes ranging between once (6%) and two times (60%) (Figure 2-a).

Daily intake of snacks was reported by the majority of students (55%) and only 20% take snacks rarely. The snack during the day is usually a bar of chocolate or other sweets (pies, cookies, cakes), pastries, one coffee, chips, pretzels, an energy drink (Figure 2-b). Similar results were observed among students from Croatia and Spain.

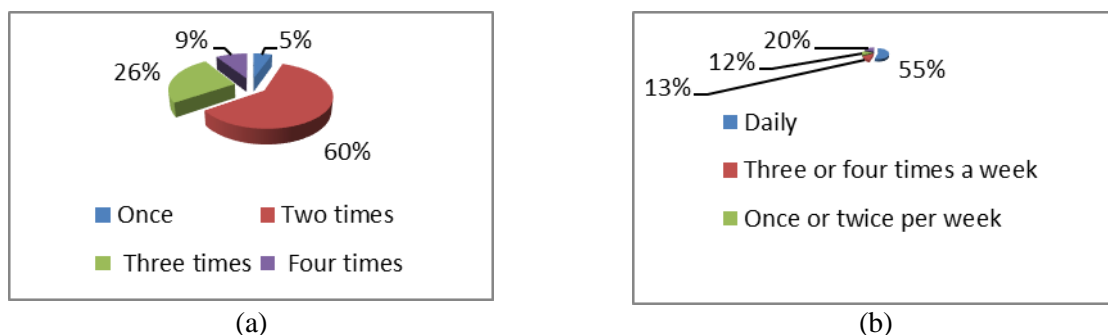


Figure 2. The answer to the questions "How many times do you eat meals except snacks?" (a) and "How often do you take snacks apart from regular meals?" (b)

More than fifty percent of students (52%) eat colored vegetables every day (Figure 3-a). Brazilian study reported that most students investigated had the habit to consume legumes daily, especially beans, which may indicate students' preference for the traditional Brazilian diet.[9]

More than fifty percent of students (58%) eat fruits every day (Figure 3-b). Similar results were observed among Italian university students.[10]

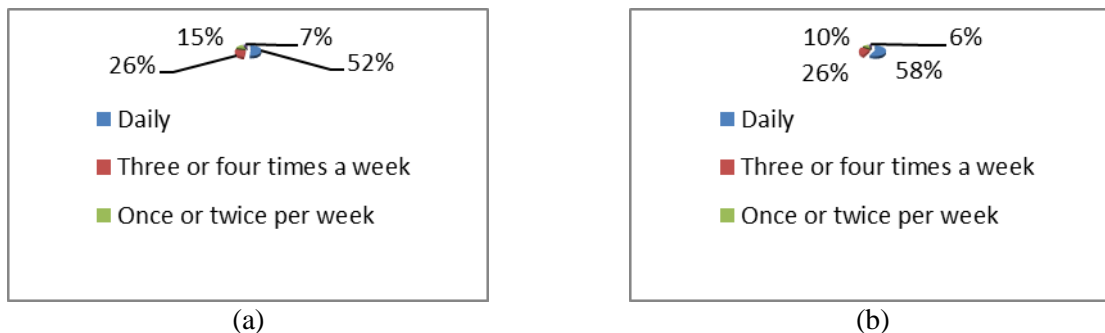


Figure 3. The answer to the questions "How often do you eat green, red or yellow colored vegetables?" (a) and "How often do you eat fruits?"(b)

The unhealthy eating practice was indicated by the fact that the majority (67%) of the students reported eating fried food daily (Figure 4-a). These preferences include fast food, French fries and another types of junk food. Frequent eating fried food can adversely affect students' health status, given the abundance of energy dense and high fat ingredients they contain. Consumption of fast food was connected with the increased risk for obesity among students in the world.[11]

Eating daily with friends and family was common among students (60%) (Figure 4-b). The habit of home cooking has been discussed in the literature, especially the relationship of the development of cooking skills with healthier eating habits, including weekly intake of fruits and vegetables and lower intake of processed foods and ready-to-eat foods.[12]

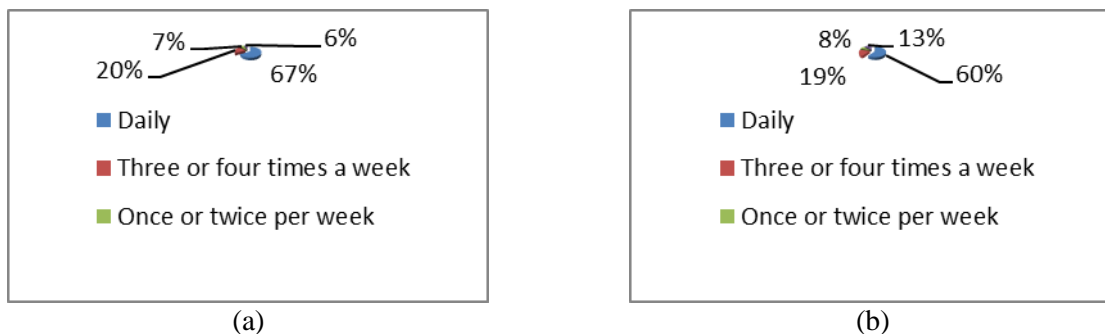


Figure 4. The answer to the question "How often do you eat fried food?"(a) and "How often do you eat with friends and family?"(b)

77% of students in this study agreed that it is important to eat a variety of foods to have a balanced and nutritious diet (Figure 5-a). The majority of students believe that eating meat, vegetables and other foods will provide them with a balanced diet.



Figure 5. The answer to the questions "What type of food do you think you should eat to have a balanced nutrition?" (a) and "How often do you drink alcohol?" (b)

Alcohol intake were common among students. (Figure 5-b). In this study, a high prevalence of alcohol consumption was found (42%). Also, there is a possibility that they might relate alcohol to independence since they are for the first time independent. The high prevalence of alcohol consumption among our students replicates findings from other survey among Croatian students. Similar results were observed among students from Western and Eastern Europe, while prevalence among Swedish University students was lower.[13]

Between 2013 and 2014 a questionnaire was administered by Rada in a sample of 1359 young people, aged between 18 and 30 years, randomly selected from urban environment covering the main university centers and Romanian (Timișoara, Zalău, Baia Mare, Cluj, Târgu Mureș, Brașov, Sibiu, Pitești, Craiova, Iași, Constanța, Tulcea and Bucharest). It is alarming that up to half of respondents have unhealthy eating habits such as frequent consumption of sweets, pastries, that they do not eat three main meals and don't eat breakfast in the morning.[14]

Conclusion

The findings of this study are limited by the use of a sample of students from two faculty which may not be a representative of all university students in Galati.

Most university students had unhealthy food intakes, characterized by irregular meals, high intake of fried food, snacks and alcohol. The percentage of students that often eat fruits and vegetables is big.

Therefore, developing nutrition education programs that promote healthy eating habits for university students should be encouraged.

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