

Determining Nutrition and Physical Activity Behaviors and Knowledge in College Females

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Background/Purpose

UGG® boots, iPods, and cyber-friendships are not the only things infiltrating American college campuses. Unhealthy dietary habits are increasingly seen in this population. Specifically, many of these females (18-24 years) are overweight and obese and exhibit abnormal lipid profiles (i.e. elevated low-density lipoprotein cholesterol and triglyceride concentrations and decreased high-density lipoprotein cholesterol concentrations) that increase their risk for coronary heart disease (CHD)^{1, 2}. This increased CHD risk in young females is associated with poor eating and physical activity habits^{3, 4}. These habits have been reported by students at The University of Rhode Island (URI) (Buckla C, unpublished observations, 2006).

Methodology

In order to assess young women in college, an IRB approved, consented survey was completed. The survey examined dietary habits, nutritional knowledge, and preferred sources of nutrition and physical activity information of female URI students. The participants (n=183) were recruited through announcements made in large lectures. Participants were between 18 and 24 years of age, were not pregnant or lactating, and reflected URI student demographics; 90.4% of survey participants were Caucasian, 4.5% were black or African American, 3.9% were Asian, American Indian, or Alaska Native.

Results

This survey found that 76.5% and 87.4% of the participants are aware of the recommended intake of fruits and vegetables, respectively. Despite knowing the recommended intake amount, 68% of the participants reported consuming less than the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommended 2 cups of fruit; 65% reported consuming less than the Dietary Guidelines recommended 2.5 cups of vegetables. Most participants (81.4%) considered 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity per day as the amount needed to maintain weight. Surprisingly, 26.3% considered >30 minutes of physical activity a healthy amount to gain weight.

Less than half (41.5%) of the participants typically get their diet and physical activity information on websites and only 1.1% look to blogs. Additionally, 15.3% of these females prefer to obtain their diet and physical activity information from websites and < 1% want to get information from blogs. A majority of the participants (79.2%) would like to visit a registered dietitian or nutritionist and 63.9% would like to see a personal trainer.

Discussion/Conclusion

It is important that young adults, especially females, follow the dietary recommendations for fruit and vegetable intake in order to decrease CHD risk. As the young adult population is spending increasingly more time on computers and universities switch

to paperless systems, one would suspect that college females would prefer to receive their health and nutrition information on the internet. However, we found there is still a desire for face to face attention when young women want to improve health through nutrition and physical activity modalities. More programs that promote weight loss, healthy eating, and activity, in a way that is based on current needs, wants, and risk behaviors of college females, are needed to prevent future development of CHD⁵. These results will guide the development of a randomized clinical trial with overweight and obese college females that aims to reduce CHD risk factors through diet and physical activity interventions.

Work Cited

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