



TO STUDY THE PATTERN OF FAST-FOOD CONSUMPTION AMONG MEDICAL STUDENTS IN A TERTIARY CARE TEACHING HOSPITAL IN A RURAL AREA

Community Medicine

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ABSTRACT

Fast foods are processed foods which are rich in calories, salt and sugar but lack the essential vitamins and minerals. The rapid increase in consumption among the youth can be directed towards its better taste, affordability and ready availability. The objective was to highlight the reasons and pattern of consumption of fast foods among medical undergraduate students. A cross-sectional study was conducted among students using a convenience sampling method. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed in Google Forms and distributed online, with 286 students participating. In present study, 51% students were in favour of fast-food consumption. 26% students consumed fast food 4 days in a week and 40% students twice a week. 35% students spent between Rs 500 to 1000 monthly on fast food. The reason for consumption was mainly for the better taste and time saving factor. The popular fast-food choices were potato chips, pizza, burger, vada pav. This study mainly analyses the factors for increased fast-food intake among the students. Students were having the knowledge of the harmful effects but were still in favour of eating. Proper dietary knowledge and awareness programs should be started to improve the health of the students.

KEYWORDS

fast foods, college students, harmful, consumption

INTRODUCTION

Food is essential for human survival, growth, repair, and daily energy needs. Consequently, individual health is directly influenced by dietary patterns. "Fast food" was first defined commercially in 1951 to describe quickly served, mass-produced food that prioritized speed and convenience over nutrition^[1]. With the rise of urbanization and modern work culture, fast food outlets have flourished across India. While such foods are accessible and inexpensive, they are often high in saturated fats, sugars, and sodium, and low in dietary fiber, vitamins, and minerals^[2]. In addition, many fast food products contain synthetic additives such as preservatives, artificial colours, and flavour enhancers, contributing to various health risks^[3]. India's diverse fast food landscape includes both global (e.g., burgers, fries, pizzas) and traditional options (e.g., vada pav, samosa, chole bhature).

The rural village of Loni in Maharashtra, India covers an area of 28.2 sq. km and a population of around 24,000. The area surrounding the college campus has many cafes, small restaurants and street vendors who mostly sell fast foods like burger, pizza, vada pav etc. Many students after college hours consume from these outlets. The college atmosphere affects the behaviour and lifestyle pattern of the students. With increasing students being inclined to consuming fast food frequently, it has become a rising cause of concern. The reason for this can be directed towards its better taste, time saving factor and low price.

Multiple studies have linked fast food consumption with health risks including obesity, hypertension, diabetes, gastrointestinal problems, and nutrient deficiencies^[4]. As the youth is the most targeted population of the fast-food markets so it is important to know why and how they make these choices. Hence the following study was conducted to know about the pattern and the associated factors of fast-food consumption among the medical undergraduate students so that they can be made aware of its harmful effects and preventive measures can be subsequently taken and also to promote awareness of healthier dietary practices.

METHODOLOGY

The sample size was based on the number of complete responses received during the study period, with 286 students included in the final analysis. To assess the consumption pattern of fast food by undergraduate students, a questionnaire was made using Google forms and circulated in the batches of all the four years of the undergraduate students. The Google form included questions based on demographic data: age, gender, Types of fast food consumed, monthly expenditure, reason for consumption and rest other questions were also added. Ethical approval was taken before data collection. Students willing to consent participated in this study.

OBSERVATION AND RESULT ANALYSIS

The maximum responses in the form were from students of third year, followed by final year and first year students. 286 students participated out of which 42% responders of the questionnaire were males and 58% were females and 64 % students were in the age group of 20 to 22, followed by 18% students in the age group of 17 to 19, and 17% students were in the age group of 23 to 25. The opinions of student regarding fast food consumption was asked out of which 146 students (51 %) responded in favour and 113 students (40 %) responded not in favour.

It was seen that the commonly consumed food items were potato chips, wafers, vada pav, dabeli (52%), and pizza, burgers, French fries(51.4%). The least favourite fast foods were bread pakora, patties(18.9%) and aloo tikki , momos (16.7%). From the data collected we saw that 44% students usually prefer tea , 48% students prefer coffee and fresh fruit juices . The least popular beverage was sweetened fruit juices which received only 11% responses. It was evident that 40% students consume fast food twice in a week, around 26 % students consume it 4 days in a week, 21% consume once a week and 6% students consume fast food every day. Only 2% of students consume it once a month and 1% consumed fast food once in 3 months.

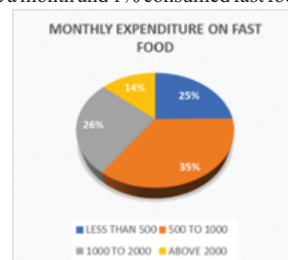


Figure 1- Monthly expenditure of students on fast food



Figure 2 – Fast food locations commonly preferred by students

To understand the main reason for consumption the results revealed that most of the students usually prefer fast food because of the taste (76.9%) and craving (65%). Along with this time saving factor (44.7%) is also a main cause of its increased consumption. 34%

students responded to consuming fast food because of no time to cook. 29% students consume fast food during parties or family hangouts. 24% students also preferred it because it is affordable. When coming to the eateries visited commonly by the students, it was seen that around 62.2% students prefer to eat fast food from cafes, 57.6% students from restaurants. Many students also prefer the local street vendors (46.1%) and college canteen (39.5%) and food courts (41.6%) it is seen that around 207 students (72%) prefer to have fast food during tea time in the evening and 132 students (46%) consume fast food during dinner.

The students were asked if there was any family history of some of the common diseases suggestive of increased risk for them. Out of total responses, 78 were for hypertension (19%), 46 for heart diseases (11%), 48 for obesity (12%) and 97 were for diabetes mellitus (24%). The students were also asked about daily physical activities and it is seen that 67.8% students prefer to exercise by walking or jogging. 38.4% students prefer to play sports. 15% students chose dance as a form of physical activity. 11.8% chose cycling and 14% chose yoga. 11% students didn't indulge in any physical activity.

DISCUSSION

The demographic profile of our sample as per gender distribution patterns closely aligns with the findings of Onurlubaş et al. (2013) [5]. However in the Jayasinghe JM et al study it was seen that that majority were female responders (62%). [6] Similar age distributions have been observed in other Indian studies [7], reinforcing that our sample reflects the general demographic trends of university students in India. In contrast to our finding that 51% of students supported fast food consumption, Bipasha and Goon (2013) reported a much higher preference rate of 98% among Bangladeshi university students [8]. Khongrangiem et al. (2018) found that 72% of students cited taste as the main reason for fast food consumption [9]. Our findings similarly highlight taste and convenience as the most influential motivators among students. A recent study in Bengaluru slums demonstrated a significant knowledge-practice gap: while 71% of participants held positive attitudes toward healthy eating, only 31% practiced good dietary habits [10]. This reflects the ongoing challenge of translating knowledge into behaviour, a pattern mirrored in our results. Other studies have emphasized that emotional and social influences—such as stress, peer pressure, and mood—affect food choices among students [11]. Our study supports this, noting that these psychosocial factors play a substantial role in determining fast food consumption patterns. Madan et al. (2021) observed that approximately 35% of students consumed junk food multiple times weekly and 26% once a week [12]. This aligns with our finding that most students consumed fast food two to four times per week.

CONCLUSION

In today's time, eating habits have changed due to technological advancements, increased urbanisation, mass effect of social media, less time to prepare food at home, greater influence of the western culture and rapid growth of fast food industries. During college hours, it is difficult for the students to consume nutritious food and they tend to incline more towards fast foods. In this study we saw that students usually preferred fast foods because of its better taste and time saving factor, when they go to parties or go on outings with friends to cafes and restaurants near the teaching hospital. They are willing to pay between Rs 500 to 1000 in a month on fast food two to four days in a week mostly on dinners when they are tired or hungry after classes. This should be a warning sign of increased risk of diseases like obesity, hypertension, gastric problems. From this study, we saw many students were having family history of diseases like diabetes, hypertension which puts them at increased risk and yet they are still consuming fast foods. The students also indulged themselves in regular physical exercises like walking, cycling, sports which is good for health. Being from medical field, the students are aware of the harmful effects but yet they still do not hesitate to consume fast food. Thus to conclude, students should be counselled on the dangers of fast food consumption and should be motivated to consume a more balanced diet and keep themselves healthy.

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