

SUMMARY

Adolescence is a transitional period from childhood to adulthood with progressive physical and psychological changes. Changes in food habits and lifestyle patterns also occur during this period which may persist into adulthood influencing their health and wellbeing. Adolescents comprise nineteen percent of the Sri Lankan population and adjusting their habits and lifestyles is of prime importance. Thus, information regarding their food practices and current trends in related behaviours would be valuable in planning and implementing interventions where necessary.

A cross sectional descriptive study was carried out in the Colombo district in 2007 to study the food habits, food preferences and the role of food advertising among adolescents.

Five focus group discussions were carried out with mothers of adolescents and, based on the data gathered, a questionnaire was formulated to use as the study instrument. Eight hundred (600 urban, 200 rural) adolescents from grade 10 classes were included in the study. Of the six hundred, 525 were from government schools and 75, from a private international school. A pre-tested self administered questionnaire was used to collect the data and the analysis was done using SPSS and Epi-Info 6 packages. School canteens were visited and the food availability and the most demanded food items were also recorded by the investigator.

Mean age of the sample was 14.6 years (range 13.3 -16.9) years with a closer representation of males and females. Most of them were Sinhalese Buddhists. As expected, the students from the private school came from a higher socioeconomic background followed by the urban students.

In spite of the changes in the society, majority of adolescents consumed their main meals which were prepared and brought from home. Only 31 percent of the study population had their morning meal mainly from outside while about half the students supplemented their morning meal with a snack from outside. A significantly higher percentage of students from the private school had their dinner from food outlets ($p < 0.001$).

Students belonging to higher socioeconomic level preferred and also consumed calorie dense western type foods while traditional foods were popular among urban and rural students. There was a greater dislike towards green leaves among private school students.

The amount of pocket money received and the money spent on food were significantly higher among the private school students; soft drink consumption and eating out from popular outlets too were higher among them.

In comparison to the studies done before, the consumption of rice and legumes seems to be decreasing while bread consumption, is increasing. Short eats and sweets consumption remain high. Significantly higher consumption of bread, chicken, eggs and processed food was seen among the private school students while students from rural schools consumed more dry fish. Milk consumption and dairy product consumption was low among private school and rural school students respectively. Overall, consumption of fruits and vegetables was fair but did not reach the recommended daily portions laid down in the guidelines for adolescents.

Forty percent of the students had viewed television programmes for more than 2 hours a day and this was significantly associated with an increase in their preference for advertised food and soft drink consumption.

It is concluded that the food habits of adolescents in Colombo district seem to be generally satisfactory. However, certain undesirable practices have been detected and need to be addressed. Television viewing has a significant association with adolescent food preferences. It is recommended that the family physicians take a leading role in implementing primary prevention programmes as the impact of such programmes would be high in family practices where doctor patient relationships are comparatively stronger.