

Abstract

Introduction: Snacking prevalence in all age groups has increased across the globe over the years. Unhealthy snacking gives rise to non-communicable disease and malnutrition; overweight/obesity. Snacking behaviour is influenced by demographic and contextual factors and varies among different settings. Adolescents are a vulnerable population for unhealthy snacking and can be the ideal target group for early nutrition interventions for behavioral changes.

Objective: To assess the snacking behaviour, its determinants and association with nutritional status among students of Grade 6-9 in schools of Galle Municipality area

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 540 early adolescents in Grades 6-9 of Government schools in Galle Municipality area, recruited using multistage cluster sampling. A pre-tested, self-administered questionnaire was used for the data collection on snacking behaviour and other variables. A 'snack' was defined as '*any food or sugary drink taken in-between main meals*' and was considered unhealthy if containing added sugar/salt or more than 150kcal. Unhealthy snacking was defined as '*consuming at least one unhealthy snack per day for most days of the week*'. Weight/height measurements were taken using standard protocols to assess their nutritional status. Data analysis was done using SPSS (Version 22). Associations between study variables were assessed using Chi-square test as appropriate.

Results: Prevalence of snacking in the sample was 96.1% and prevalence of unhealthy snacking was 22.2%. Snacking frequency was 1-2 times a day in 81.8%. Snacks were chosen in a majority (38.5%) by themselves and in 54.6% the reason for choosing was perceived "healthiness" of the snacks. The preferred snacking time in the majority was evening (49.1%) and the snacking context was teatime (62.8%), followed by while watching TV (43.0%). The most popular snacks were biscuits (43.7%), chips (31.9%) and pastries (22.2%). 90% reported replacing main meals with a snack. Significant associations of unhealthy snacking were found with higher monthly income ($p=0.013$), availability of pocket money ($p=0.000$) Unhealthy snacking was significantly associated with snacking at teatime ($p=0.032$). No significant associations were found between unhealthy snacking and gender, parental education status or other contextual factors such as place of stay, mode of traveling and time taken for traveling to school ($p>0.05$). Nutritional status of the adolescents did not show a significant association with unhealthy snacking ($p>0.05$).

Conclusions and recommendations: Snacking behaviour is common among all adolescents. Unhealthy snacking is less prevalent and shows associations with income and availability/use of pocket money for snacks. Nutrition interventions should be conducted focusing on adolescents as well as families to change unhealthy snacking behaviour.