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Knowledge on health hazards of junk foods and practice on consumption of junk foods among adolescent school children in Jaffna Education Division, Sri Lanka and their associated factors

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Background: Junk food has become a prominent content in the diet nowadays. Frequent consumption of junk foods and their consequences has become a major public concern globally. It acts as a risk factor for different non-communicable diseases.

Objective: To assess the knowledge on health hazards of junk foods and practice on the consumption of junk foods among adolescent school children and to assess the factors influencing knowledge and practice.

Methods & Materials: A school-based descriptive cross-sectional study carried out among 633 grade 8, 9, and 10 school children in the Jaffna Education Division, Sri Lanka. Data were collected by using an online form of a self-administered questionnaire. Chi-square statistical test was used to identify the factors that are associated with knowledge and practice regarding junk food. Scoring and cut-off values of the knowledge part were determined by consulting experts as good knowledge- >70%, moderate knowledge-50-70% and poor knowledge-< 50%.

Results: The age range of study participants were from 12-16 years. The mean age of participants was 13.91±0.89 years. Most of them were females (65.7%), Sri Lankan Tamil (99.5%), non-vegetarians (93.4%) from nuclear family (71.7%), and Hindus (56.4%). Nearly one-fourth of participants (24.5%) had good knowledge, 36.8% had moderate, and 38.7% had poor knowledge. Nearly 54.7% agreed with the habit of consuming junk foods. Most of the participants chose rolls (30.1%), and pizza (28.6%) as junk food they wished to eat. Nearly two-fifth (39.9%) of participants preferred junk foods over homemade. The majority (84.1%) preferred junk foods due to its new taste. Religion ($p<0.001$), education level of father ($p<0.001$), education level of mother ($p=0.046$), occupation of father ($p=0.028$), occupation of mother ($p<0.001$) were significantly associated with the knowledge regarding health hazards of junk foods. The current study revealed that, a good knowledge level was observed among Hindus (31.0%) which was higher compared to other religions (14.9%). Age ($p<0.001$), religion ($p=0.002$), occupation of the father ($p<0.001$) had a significant relationship with the habit of taking junk foods.

Conclusion: The majority of the participants knew that frequent intake of junk food was not a healthy dietary pattern. Most of the participants lack knowledge regarding food additives and most of them preferred junk foods due to their new taste, colour and attractiveness.

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