

Are Indian adolescents moving towards an unhealthy future?

Over the last decade, adolescent obesity has emerged as a major public health challenge in India. It is recognised as a potential risk factor for a number of non-communicable diseases including heart disease, pulmonary disease, type 2 diabetes, psychosocial ailments, and certain cancers. All these life-threatening illnesses pose a negative impact both on the health security and economic productivity of India. In the light of these negative consequences, there is an immediate need to curb this rapidly proliferating disease burden.

Unhealthy dietary consumption patterns have been identified as a primary root cause for this disease burden. Indeed, post globalization, urban Indians have adopted poor eating habits. India has witnessed a major transformation in its dietary culture i.e. the replacement of traditional staple diet (e.g. rice, pulse) with Westernised foods (e.g. burgers, French fries, pizza). This changing dietary phenomenon is triggered by the massive influx of multinational fast food companies in urbanised India. Additionally, the increased rate of female employment, hectic work schedules, devaluation of cooking skills, and widespread availability of ready-to-eat convenience foods has attributed to this mushrooming Westernized food culture. Considering the negative effects of this food culture on human health, it is crucial to inculcate healthy eating habits in Indians from an early age i.e. adolescence.

Surprisingly, very little is known about the food consumption patterns of urban Indian adolescents. Therefore, in this study we examined the food consumption patterns of adolescents aged 14-16 years, residing in Kolkata Metropolitan Area, India. At the onset, a questionnaire consisting of 59 food and beverage items commonly consumed by Indian adolescents was developed. Subsequently, 356 adolescent boys and 670 adolescent girls completed this questionnaire by reporting on their previous day's food consumption.

In general, Indian adolescents exhibited unhealthy dietary consumption patterns; over two-thirds (70%) reported eating three or more servings of energy-dense, nutrient poor snacks on the previous day while nearly half (47%) of the adolescents consumed three or more servings of sugar-sweetened beverages. With regards to healthy foods, adolescents reported very limited intakes. About three-fifths (59%) refrained from consuming pulses and legumes. Daily intake of fruits (45%) and vegetables (30%) was not reported by many adolescents. Animal products like dairy and non-vegetarian food items (e.g. egg, fish, chicken) were also not a common feature of adolescents' daily diets. Generally, adolescent girls had healthier dietary intakes than adolescent boys. Overall, these findings suggest that Indian adolescents are moving towards an unhealthy future!

The overconsumption of unhealthy foods and under consumption of nutritious foods can severely impact the nutritional and health profiles of Indian adolescents. Since, adolescent food and health behaviours track into adulthood, it becomes all the more critical to empower adolescents to make informed food decisions and lead healthy lives in future. Therefore, in order to promote healthy eating among adolescents Indian schools could implement healthy school canteen policies and

skills-focussed nutrition curricula. Both healthy school canteen policies and nutrition curricula have been successful in inculcating healthy eating habits among school goers. Besides the school food environment, the home food environment can also play a pivotal role in improving the eating habits of adolescents. The positive influence of parental role-modelling of healthy eating and easy availability and accessibility of fruits and vegetables in homes is critical to development of healthy eating behaviours in young ones. All these public health initiatives should be implemented at the earliest to enable Indian adolescents in developing healthy food practices for their future.

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