

AN EXAMINATION OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE NUTRITIONAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS AND AMERICANS SURVEYED BY THE AMERICAN DIETETIC ASSOCIATION (ADA)

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INTRODUCTION

Dietary intake and physical activity play a major role in the prevention of chronic disease. Since the prevention of risk factors for chronic disease begins early in life, it is important to assess the attitudes and behaviors of younger populations, such as college students, to examine the need for further education and behavior modification efforts among these individuals.

PURPOSE

The primary objective of this study was to examine the possible differences between the nutritional attitudes and behaviors of resident college students in Northeastern Pennsylvania and those of Americans surveyed by Wirthlin Worldwide in 1999 for the American Dietetic Association. It was hypothesized that no differences exist between the attitudes, behaviors, and information sources of the two populations. However, while some similarities existed, enough differences were found such that the null hypotheses were not supported.

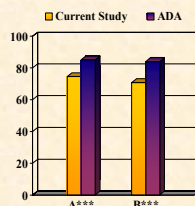
METHODOLOGY

Of 504 resident university students asked to participate in this study, 133 students (age: 19.81 ±3.05 yrs.; height: 166 ±0.09 cm; weight: 65.11 ±16.24 kg; BMI 23.58 ±5.0) completed a printed survey (RR = 26.4%) adapted from the American Dietetic Association's *Nutrition and You: Trends 2000* telephone survey. Surveys were distributed and returned via campus mail. Chi square analyses were utilized to determine differences between national and student survey results. The level of significance was set at $p \leq .05$.

RESULTS

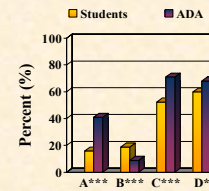
Body Mass Index ^a (n=132)		
Classification	BMI	BMI n (%)
Underweight	< 18.5	5 (3.8)
Normal	18.5 – 24.9	92 (69.8)
Overweight	25.0 – 29.9	25 (18.9)
Obesity		
Class I	30.0 – 34.9	6 (4.5)
Class II	35.0 – 39.9	0 (0.0)
Class III	≥ 40.0	4 (3.0)

^a BMI = wgt (kg)/Hgt (m)²

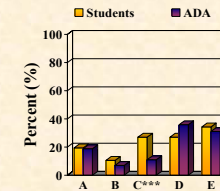


A – Diet and nutrition has high personal importance
B – Exercise and physical activity has high personal importance

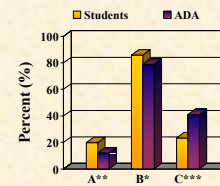
RESULTS (cont.)



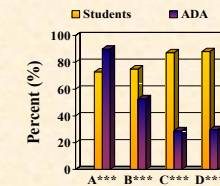
A – Doing all they can to achieve balanced nutrition and a healthy diet
B – Doing less than they were two years ago to achieve balanced nutrition and a healthy diet
C – Careful selection of food to achieve balanced nutrition and a healthy diet
D – Conscious effort to achieve regular exercise and physical activity



Major reasons for not doing more to achieve balanced nutrition and a healthy diet
A – Time to track diet
B – Lack of understanding of guidelines
C – Need for more practical tips for eating well
D – Satisfaction with current diet
E – Unwilling to give up foods



A – Apply new diet and nutrition information to their diets
B – Believe physical activity is as important as a nutritious diet
C – Consider body weight as an indicator of a healthy diet



A – Heard of a Registered Dietitian
B – Heard of the American Dietetic Association
C – Interest in consultation with a qualified nutrition expert
D – Interest in consultation with a Registered Dietitian

*** $p \leq .001$ ** $p \leq .01$ * $p \leq .05$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Since the ability to avert chronic disease begins early in life, efforts to provide practical information that aid in prevention must be a priority. Physical activity and healthy eating practices are the key elements in disease prevention. Yet, compared to ADA survey participants, college students assign significantly less personal importance to these areas and indicate significantly less emphasis on the achievement of a balanced nutrition and regular exercise. In the student population, less personal exposure to the deleterious health effects associated with eating poorly and lack of exercise, coupled with a focus on academic and extracurricular activities, may lead to reduced importance of and less concentration on balanced nutrition and activity. Indeed, fewer students felt they were doing all they could to achieve a healthy diet, and more felt they were doing less than in previous years. However, more students than ADA participants cited a need for practical tips as a major reason for not doing more to achieve a healthy diet, and were more likely to be interested in a consultation with a Registered Dietitian/nutrition expert, suggesting a desire for information to improve their health. This study indicates both a need for attitude and behavior changes and an interest in nutrition education and guidance in the student population. Registered Dietitians should participate in planning and implementing programs to help meet the needs and interests of this population and to assist in the improvement of long-term health outcomes.