



Food Choices and Nutrition Habits of University Students: A Survey in Balıkesir University

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Extensive Summary

Demographic factors (Gama et al., 2018), genetic factors such as physical appearance, weight and disease state (Silventoinen & Kontinen, 2020), socio-cultural factors such as family, friends, social status, religious beliefs (Çalıştır et al., 2005; Voytyuk & Hruschka, 2017; Keith et al., 2018), ecological and environmental factors (Bruening et al., 2012; González-Gil et al., 2019; Battaglia, 2020), individual factors such as hunger, satiety, mood, stress, habit, familiarity, preferences, sensory factors and personal motivation factors (Swanson et al., 2013; Girgin & Karakaş, 2017; Keith et al., 2018; Gama et al., 2018; González-Gil et al., 2019), food-related features such as nutritional value, taste, sensory appeal, price appropriateness, cost, quality, hygiene and ease of preparation (Korkmaz, 2005; Özdemir, 2010; Girgin & Karakaş, 2017; Vilaro et al., 2017; Keith et al., 2018; Zonneveld et al., 2019), health-related factors (Vilaro et al., 2017; Gama et al., 2018), social media and advertisements (Swanson et al., 2013; Vilaro et al., 2017) affect food choice and nutritional habits. Based on these assumptions, the aim of the study is to determine the food and beverage selection decisions and dietary habits of the students studying at Balıkesir University. The data were obtained from 405 students who studied at 10 different faculties and high-schools in the central campus of Balıkesir University between November 2019 and February 2020. Participants were selected with easy sampling method by using purposeful sample selection technique. Ranking scale and descriptive statistics were used in the analysis of the data.

Research findings show that education level of the mother affects the food preferences of the students and affects their eating habits. In addition, the monthly expenditures and the amount of expenditure that the students spend on nutrition are low. This situation points to other social problems as well as nutritional problems. These findings show that Balıkesir University

students are predominantly from families with low socio-economic income and education, where nutritional problems are more common.

Research findings show that students perceive breakfast more important, but the habit of having breakfast is not as common as dinner. Skipping meals among students is also very high. The results show that the habit of skipping meals is common not only at breakfast but also at lunch and dinner. Considering the assumptions in the literature that regular nutrition increases mental performance (Saygin et al., 2011; Chung et al., 2012; Ermiş et al., 2015), it can be argued that irregular eating habits among Balıkesir University students are one of the reasons that decrease academic performance. Participants list the reasons for skipping meals as lack of time, waking up late, being late for school, anorexia, lack of preparation, dieting, and insufficient purchasing power due to economic reasons. Daily protein intake among students is below the prescribed reference weight by Turkey Nutrition Guide (2019). On the other hand, daily carbohydrate consumption is well above the reference amounts. The criteria taken into account in the food choice are listed as satiety, suitability to taste, price suitability, hygiene and raw material quality, in order of priority.

Considering the research results, the following recommendations can be made to stakeholders for a healthy and balanced diet of university students.

- Research results show that maternal education level and awareness about nutrition are effective in students' healthy and balanced diet. For this reason, it is recommended to address the problem at a macro level and raise awareness of parents about healthy nutrition.
- In order to solve the problem of unhealthy nutrition among students, it can be suggested to provide education that raises awareness about nutrition at all levels starting from primary education.
- Research results show that the most important reasons for skipping meals among students are late wake up and mismanagement of time. In order to solve the problem, it may be suggested to raise awareness of students on "Time Management" and individual responsibilities.
- Daily carbohydrate intake of students is above the reference amounts. However, in order to increase the mental and academic success of students, it is necessary to increase the intake of food containing protein, vitamin and mineral substances. For this purpose, it can be suggested that the meals offered to students at universities should be composed of menus rich in these nutrients.

- Considering that smoking and alcohol use is a health problem, providing Green Crescent counseling services to students in university campuses may reduce smoking and alcohol use among university students.
- Financial and socially supported meals offered at universities may contribute significantly to problems related to healthy and balanced nutrition among students. For this purpose, it is recommended to consider the problem at a macro level and to cooperate between university administrations and stakeholders. With such cooperation, students can be served breakfast, soup or snacks for free or symbolic fees.

In future studies, determining students' perceptions of healthy and balanced nutrition based on demographic characteristics, and determining what problems they experience in nutrition will provide further gains for the literature.