

The association of nutritional knowledge with food choices and dietary habits of adolescents in urban Sri Lanka

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Knowledge on nutrition is a key factor in promoting healthy eating behaviours among adolescents. However, even with satisfactory knowledge, it has become a challenge to put that knowledge into practice especially in urban Sri Lankan settings where numerous factors affect food choices. The study assessed the association of knowledge on nutrition with food choices and eating habits among adolescents in Colombo, Sri Lanka. A cross-sectional study was conducted among 182 students from two schools in Colombo. Eating habits and food choices, socio-demographic and economic factors and knowledge on nutrition were assessed using a face and content validated self-administered questionnaire. A scoring system was used for knowledge on nutrition based on which the students were categorized into having satisfactory and unsatisfactory food choices by a predetermined cut-off. Similarly, the respondents were classified into having healthy and unhealthy food consumption. Chi-squared test and Fisher's exact test were used to explore categorical variables and Pearson correlation coefficient for continuous variables. The significance level was set as $p < 0.05$. Out of the study population, only 45.1% had satisfactory knowledge on nutrition while 54.9% were found to have unsatisfactory knowledge on nutrition. Knowledge on nutrition of students was found to be significantly associated with their gender ($p < 0.001$), family influence ($p < 0.001$) and their personal preferences ($p = 0.044$) but showed no significant correlation with actual healthy food consumption ($p = 0.332$). Despite relatively adequate knowledge on nutrition, many had unhealthy food consumption, indicating a gap between knowledge and practice. Although many urban Sri Lankan adolescents have an adequate understanding of nutrition, it was not associated with healthy eating habits. Hence it is of importance that public health strategies focus not only on nutrition education but also on enhancing psychological well-being, promoting media literacy, and developing practical skills such as meal planning and healthy food preparation.

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