

## **The socio-economic determinants of food choices and dietary habits among adolescents in urban Sri Lanka: A cross-sectional study**

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Adolescence is a crucial period in life to form lifelong dietary habits which can have lasting effects on their health in later life. In urban areas, adolescents suffering from both undernutrition and overweight or obesity due to various factors is a critical public health concern. This study assessed the socio-economic factors affecting food choices and habits of adolescents in Colombo, Sri Lanka. A cross-sectional study was conducted among 182 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 food consumption based on which the students were categorized into having healthy and unhealthy food choices. 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, 54.4% students had healthy food choices while 45.6% did not. Almost 89% of the respondents considered cost when buying food and more than half (55.5%) skipped breakfast, due to financial issues and time constraints. Around 26.11% stated that the food options available at school were unhealthy. Neither father's occupation ( $p=0.260$ ) nor pocket money ( $p=0.792$ ) showed significant association with the food choices. Social determinants such as family discussions ( $p=0.004$ ) and emphasis around healthy nutrition ( $p=0.048$ ) and religious practices ( $p=0.003$ ) were positively associated with healthy food choices. The socio-economic factors along with the limited food availability limits adolescents in Sri Lanka to access healthy foods. Thus, public health strategies need to prioritize economic support with improved affordability and availability of healthy food choices and enhanced involvement from families and schools to reduce malnutrition among adolescents.

**Keywords:** *Adolescent nutrition, Malnutrition, Cost, Public health, Food availability*