

KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDE AND PRACTICES TOWARDS JUNK FOOD AMONG URBAN YOUTH

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The rapid expansion of globalization, food marketing, and urban lifestyles has substantially reshaped the dietary patterns of young populations. Urban youth, in particular, are exposed to aggressive commercial food environments that promote highly processed, energy-dense junk foods. These foods rich in saturated fats, trans-fats, simple sugars, sodium, synthetic additives and low nutritive value have become a defining component of modern dietary behaviour. Understanding the knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) related to junk food consumption among urban youth is therefore essential for addressing emerging public health challenges such as obesity, metabolic syndrome, hypertension, dyslipidaemia, and early-onset non-communicable diseases. Youth dietary transitions are influenced by urbanization, peer networks and food media.

AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE DIMENSIONS

Research conducted among adolescents and young adults indicates moderate awareness regarding the adverse health implications of junk food. While most youth recognize that junk food contributes to weight gain, acne, lethargy, and long-term metabolic risks, their understanding often lacks depth with respect to biochemical mechanisms and clinical outcomes. Knowledge tends to remain superficial, focusing primarily on calorie content rather than structural dietary risks such as high fructose intake, trans-fat accumulation, elevated glycaemic load and chronic low-grade inflammation.

Studies from India, South-East Asia, and Western contexts reveal that youth frequently underestimate the quantity of hidden sugars and sodium in processed foods. Many adolescents remain unaware of recommended daily allowances for fats and sugars, and only a minority understand the role of fibre deficits or micronutrient displacement caused by habitual junk food consumption. Even when nutritional labeling is available, comprehension and utilization by youth remain limited. Knowledge is often derived from informal sources such as peers, social media, or family experiences rather than structured nutrition education programs.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS JUNK FOOD CONSUMPTION

Urban youth commonly exhibit ambivalent attitudes toward junk food. While they acknowledge negative health consequences, they maintain strong positive perceptions related to convenience, affordability, taste, brand appeal, and social inclusivity. Junk food consumption is deeply embedded in youth culture, symbolizing modernity, autonomy, and participation in global food trends. Marketing strategies—such as celebrity endorsements, youth-centric advertisements, and strategic placement near educational institutions further reinforce favourable attitudes.

Youth often rationalize junk food intake through beliefs such as “eating sometimes is harmless,” “healthy food is boring,” or “physical activity compensates for poor diet.” This cognitive dissonance leads to selective acceptance of health

information. Peer influence strongly shapes attitudes, wherein consumption becomes a shared activity for identity formation and social bonding. Youth are also disproportionately influenced by the sensory attributes of junk food—particularly its addictive combination of fats, sugars, and salt designed to stimulate reward pathways.

PRACTICES AND CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOUR

The practised behaviour of urban youth reveals regular consumption of junk foods despite awareness of their risks. Multiple studies show that adolescents consume fast food at least two to three times per week, while intake of packaged snacks, fried items, sugar-sweetened beverages, and confectioneries is even more frequent. Convenience-driven behaviour is strongly associated with academic schedules, long commutes, limited home-cooked meal availability, and the proliferation of fast-food outlets.

Snack substitution, where processed foods are consumed in place of balanced meals, is increasingly common. Late-night eating, frequenting cafés, online food ordering, and celebratory consumption further contribute to habitual intake. Behavioural determinants such as stress, emotional eating, peer imitation, and exposure to advertising elevate consumption patterns. Additionally, adolescents rarely monitor portion sizes, and many remain unaware of the cumulative impact of repeated high-calorie snacking.

The influence of the home environment is complex. While parents may discourage junk food, many households still purchase processed snacks as quick options. Youth also show limited commitment to altering their behaviour unless health concerns become personally relevant. Physical activity levels often fail to counterbalance high caloric intake, contributing to weight gain and early metabolic changes.

SOCIOCULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINANTS

Urban settings create a “toxic food environment” characterized by easy availability, aggressive advertising, and normalization of consumption. Fast-food outlets near schools and colleges tend to offer inexpensive combo meals targeted directly at youth. Media has increasingly framed junk food as aspirational, linking it with modern lifestyles. The role of globalization is particularly noteworthy, as multinational brands became status symbols among young consumers.

Socioeconomic factors also influence patterns; higher-income youth may consume more branded fast foods, while lower-income groups often rely on inexpensive fried snacks. Gender differences emerge as well: males are more likely to consume fast food frequently, while females may show slightly greater caution but still exhibit strong preference for processed snacks due to convenience.

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS AND BEHAVIOURAL OUTCOMES

Youth junk food consumption with rising prevalence of early overweight, increased waist circumference, insulin resistance, dyslipidaemia and hypertension. High intake of sugar-sweetened beverages is associated with impaired glucose tolerance and fatty liver markers. Diets rich in trans-fats correlate with increased LDL levels and endothelial dysfunction in young populations. Frequent consumption also contributes to poor academic performance, reduced attention span, fatigue, and micronutrient deficiencies.

Despite awareness of these risks, translation of knowledge into healthy behaviour remains weak. The gap between awareness and practice indicates that knowledge alone does not drive behaviour change; emotional, cultural, environmental, and economic factors play crucial

roles in shaping youth food choices. Urbanization has further widened the disconnect between traditional dietary patterns and contemporary food behaviour.

EDUCATIONAL AND POLICY CHALLENGES

Structured nutrition education remains limited in most school and college systems. Existing programs often lack behavioural reinforcement, culturally relevant messaging, and youth engagement strategies. There is limited emphasis on media literacy, leaving adolescents vulnerable to persuasive marketing techniques. Policy interventions such as regulating advertisements and restricting sales near educational institutions, remained insufficient. Strengthening school-based nutrition programs, improving food labeling literacy, and creating youth-friendly public health messaging remain critical needs.

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