

## **BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION AND DIETARY PATTERNS AMONG TEENAGE GIRLS**

A.V. Pramuditha Madhavi<sup>1</sup>, M.I. Nirmalie<sup>1</sup>, R. C. W. Rajapaksa<sup>2</sup>, M. M. A. R. Chandralatha<sup>2</sup>,  
W. M. S. Udaya Kumari<sup>3</sup> and L. Chandana<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Department of Health Sciences, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nawala*

<sup>2</sup> *The School of Nursing, Kurunegala*

<sup>3</sup> *MOH Division, Weerambagedara, Kurunegala*

<sup>4</sup> *Teaching Hospital, Kurunegala*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A close relationship exists between nutrition and human health (Wickramanayake, 1996). To maintain a healthy lifestyle, having a balanced diet is very important. To achieve a balanced diet humans are supposed to adhere to the recommended dietary intake declared by the World Health Organization. This recommended dietary intake varies according to the developmental stages of human life. Among the different developmental stages of human life, the growth spurt is specifically attributed to teenagers. Growth spurt is defined as the period during which a rapid increase in height, weight, and muscle mass are taking place. During this particular period, teenagers try to create their own food habits without the guidance of parents (Kaslow, 1998). Ignoring their recommended diet for this specific age more teenagers in general, refuse their regular diet and create their own food habits aiming to have their desired body image. In particular, teenage girls are the most vulnerable group who engage in this malpractice because of their concern about the socially prescribed body image of having a thin body shape. Body image is defined as a subjective picture of one's own physical appearance by self observation and by the reaction of others (Oxford, 2005). Especially, teenage girls perceive their body image based on values shared by peer groups (Pruneti. *et al*, 2007) Moreover, some studies found that every teenager imitates the body shape and image of socially appreciated persons such as artists, singers or popular persons (Khor, 2009). This results in pushing them to achieve a so called popular body images using uninformed dietary practices and unhealthy habits which affects desired growth. These malpractices of food habits among teenagers lead to deteriorated health among them. This situation creates major health problems such as malnutrition and anemia among the teenage population (Medical Research Institute, 2010). This has become a major social issue and this may lead to further problems in the future generations such as low birth weight babies (Marlow, 1998). Therefore, it is a timely to explore the dietary habits and body image perception among teenage girls.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study was carried out using a quantitative approach in the area of the Medical Officer of Health (MOH), Weerambagedara. Quantitative research refers to data to be collected in numerical form and especially focuses on natural setting (Diachuk, 1995). In this study a descriptive design was used to capture the teenage girls' dietary practices and body image perception as human characteristics. Further, the study mainly focused on exploring the existing current situation of the issue.

Sample size was 400, 16-19 years aged teenage girls selected from MOH area Weerambagedara using the purposive sampling technique. Questionnaire was used as the tool for data collection and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Considering the strengths of this design, it is easy to implement the descriptive design according to the purpose of this study because manipulation, control, and randomization are

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be addressed to A.V. Pramuditha Madhavi, avpma@ou.ac.lk

not required to describe a natural situation (Burns, 2009).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the 400 participants, 270 (67.5%) were used to an unhealthy dietary pattern. Healthy dietary pattern was used by 130 (32.5%) participants of them. Therefore, these results clearly showed (Figure1) that teenage girls were more prone to have unhealthy dietary practices.

Taking the data into further consideration the knowledge of participants is poor regarding a balanced diet.

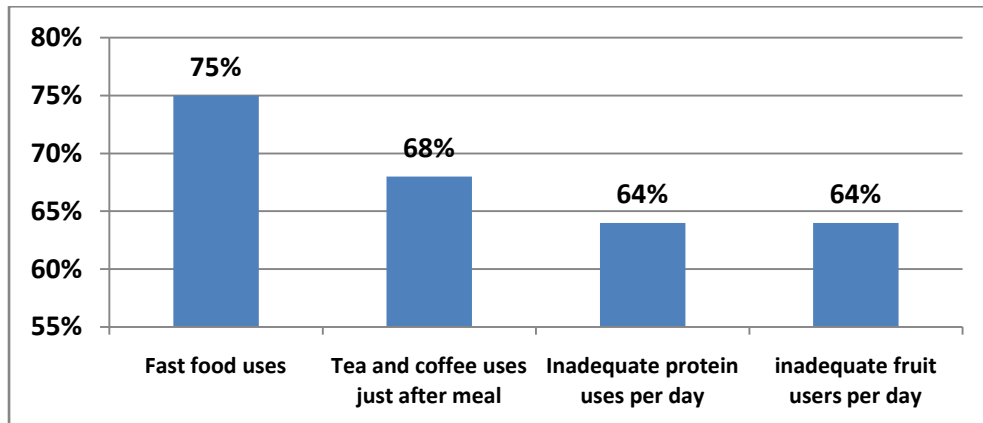


Figure 1: Practices of Unhealthy dietary habits

In terms of participants' attitudes and beliefs of their own body image, relating to their dietary practices and Body Mass Index (BMI), the study could find the following differences among them.

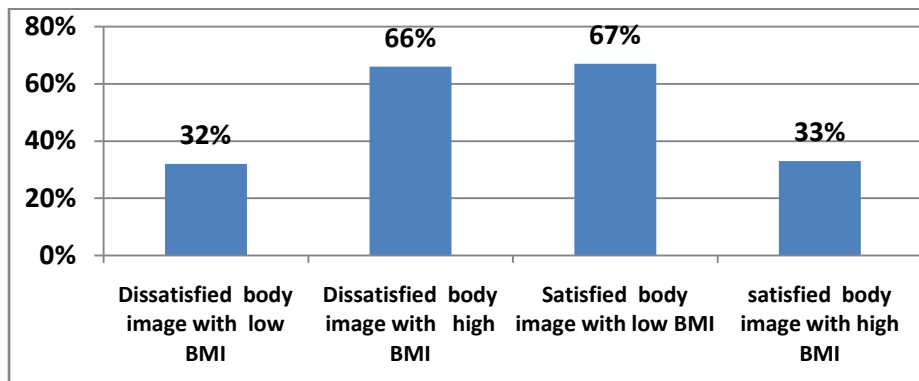


Figure 2: Relationship of Attitude & beliefs on body image and BMI

These results showed that most of the participants are dissatisfied because of their high BMI as well as low BMI rates while surprisingly few were satisfied for the same reasons.

Participants were dissatisfied with their own body image (Figure 2) due to different influencing factors, such as mass media (70%), parental influence (8%), attractive dress for slim body (11%) and peer group influence (22%). According to the findings relatively higher numbers of participants were influenced by mass media.

The study further identified some perceived barriers among teenage girls in achieving desired dietary practices in relation to maintaining their desired body image (Figure 3).

The findings of the study showed that a majority of the participants had a normal BMI. However, a considerable number of underweight teenagers presented in the age group of 17 – 18 years (Fonseka & Waliange, 2006). In contrast, O'Dea (2010) found higher prevalence of

overweight and obese teenagers among Australian adolescents. This may be due to the influence of genetic factors inherent to western people and food patterns in their culture.

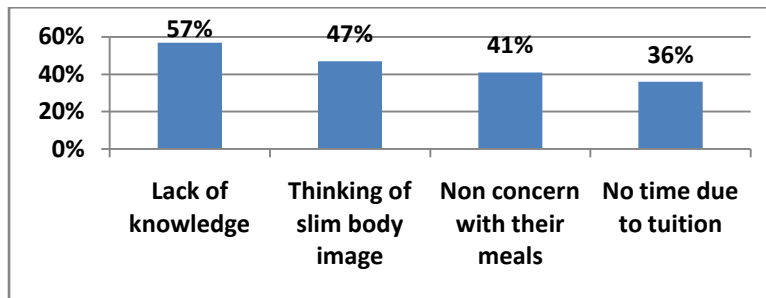


Figure 3: Barriers to maintain desired dietary practices

A majority of the participants were used to having unhealthy dietary patterns. Healthy dietary patterns were used by very few of them. As a whole Sri Lankan society normally has three meals and two snacks per day. A majority of the participants in the study were also the same. But their meals were not rich in nutritious elements. They consumed more vegetables and low amounts of fat, protein and fruit. This is similar to the study finding of Sukumaki (2005). This dietary pattern may lead to developing anemia and vitamin deficiency. Furthermore, the nutrition and food survey, Ministry of Health (2010) indicated that the above nutritional deficiencies are evidenced among school children.

Even while having normal BMI, many teenagers were dissatisfied and perceived themselves as being in the overweight category. Also some underweight participants perceived themselves as being overweight. Both groups believed in dieting as a strategy to lose weight. The smallest proportion of the sample were teenage girls who were dissatisfied due to thinness. This finding is nearly similar to another study (Khor *et al*, 2009). This is in contrast to the study of O’Dea(2010). Furthermore, out of the whole sample a significant number of participants had engaged in dietary control in the past. Some of them still used particular diet menus. Both groups had not followed advice from a dietitian. Considering the knowledge about nutrition of teenage girls, a majority had less knowledge about their nutrition needs. At the very least they were not aware about the food groups, which are necessary to be included in their diet. This finding is nearly similar to a few other studies in other countries (Khor *et al*, 2009). Fonseka and Weliange (2006), the Sri Lankan researchers also identified the need for improving knowledge of adolescents regarding their nutrition.

Considering the perception of the body image, the majority of teenage girls were concerned with their body shape. This finding is similar to other studies (Khor *et al*, 2009), which have also found teenage girls to be concerned and preoccupied with their body image (Sukamaki *et al*, 2005). In this study, a considerable percentage of participants were dissatisfied with their body image. Adkins and Stivers (2008) explored similar findings. According to the findings of the present study more than half of the participants who were dissatisfied with body shape were dissatisfied due to the influence of the media. The rest of the participants were influenced by family members and peer group in relation to their dissatisfaction. Considering the above finding, it is clear that the most powerful factors in shaping attitude of teenage girls and for creating negative self-esteem about their body image are family and media. Further peers play an integral role in shaping attitude among teenagers concerning body image and weight loss behavior (Burns, 2009).

While exploring the barriers among teenage girls, the researchers identified a lack of knowledge as the major barrier to maintain desired, proper dietary practices in relation to maintain their desired body image. Other barriers are, non-concern about meals and lack of time to take meals due to tuition. O’Dea (2010) identified barriers as insufficient physical education, and physical activity to maintain desired body image.

Consideration of body image is common among adolescents, as they undergo rapid physical growth and body shapes changes. Dietary habits and body image perception is an interrelated concept in different groups (Carlo, 2000). Teenagers especially are more concerned about body image. Therefore, they tend to practice distorted dietary habits. This situation may lead to numerous bad effects in their future lives.

## **CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

Having a distorted body image may lead to negative effects such as unhealthy eating habits and disordered eating behaviors. It is recommended that appropriate educational efforts on body image and nutrition be implemented in to school health activities for teenage girls.

It is important to recommend educational programmes for the girls and their parents regarding nutrition of the adolescents. Further research is recommended regarding adolescents' nutrition using different approaches. Appointing a community health nurse is highly recommended.

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