Eating Patterns of School Children and Adolescents in Kuala Lumpur

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ABSTRACT

Eating patterns such as eating frequency, skipping of breakfast, and frequency of meals eaten away from home might influence school-going children's nutritional status, which will then influence their health and academic performance. This article reports the findings of a survey on the eating patterns of the school children and adolescents in Kuala Lumpur. A total of 3620 school children studying in Primary 5, Secondary 2 and Secondary 4 were selected using multi-stage sampling. The students were surveyed using a pre-tested questionnaire while their weights and heights were measured in the field. It was found that 19.9% skipped at least one meal a day with the youngest group having the lowest prevalence. The most frequently missed meal is breakfast (12.6%) followed by lunch (6.7%) and dinner (4.4%). The school is an important provider of breakfast and lunch for the students. As the students' age increased, the prevalence of eating breakfast and lunch in school increased. The youngest age group had the highest prevalence of snacking and taking of nutritional supplements (p<0.05). Fast food and local hawker food were also consumed by about 60-70% of the students. Logistic regression analysis showed that skipping of breakfast is significantly associated with age, sex, BMI and taking of nutritional supplements. Promotion of healthy eating should be targeted at students in primary and secondary schools as they tend to depend on outside food.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing awareness of the importance of diet for health promotion and disease prevention has led to a greater concern about the diet and eating patterns of school children and adolescents. Eating patterns such as eating frequency, skipping of breakfast, and frequency of meals eaten away from home might influence school-going children's nutritional status, which then influences their health and academic performance (Shaw, 1998). Eating patterns established during adolescence shape the diet later in life (Dwyer et al., 2001). Eating breakfast is important for the health and development of children and adolescents. Evidence suggests that breakfast is a central component of nutritional well-being, contributing to total daily energy and nutrient requirements (Nicklas et al., 1993). Studies have demonstrated that moderate undernutrition affects children's cognitive development and school performance, and skipping meals can adversely affect children's performance in problem-solving tasks (Pollitt, 1995). Skipping breakfast can negatively

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