

# Fast food preferences and food habits among students of private universities in Bangladesh

Munmun Shabnam Bipasha<sup>1</sup>, Shatabdi Goon<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Department of Economics; <sup>2</sup>BSc Thesis Student, Nutrition and Food Engineering Department, Daffodil International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

## Abstract

Consumption of takeaway and fast food by young adolescents is no longer confined to the developed countries; it has spread to the developing countries as well. The culture of fast food consumption has replaced the traditional meal among university students and is a great public health concern. Excessive consumption of fast food is responsible for obesity epidemics and the cause of a dramatic increase of obesity-related diseases (e.g. diabetes, heart diseases etc). A cross-sectional study was carried out from March to April, 2013 among students attending in four established private universities of Bangladesh situated in Dhanmondi, Dhaka: Daffodil International University, United International University, World University of Bangladesh, and State University of Bangladesh. The aim of the present study was to examine the preference, prevalence and pattern of fast food consumption among the students. The prevalence of fast food consumption among those students was 98.5%, and 43.3% of their pocket money was spent on its purchase. The important factors for the preference of fast food include good taste, easy accessibility, increased convenience, and pocket friendly in nature. Approximately 22% of the respondents mentioned that they consumed fast food 4 days per week and more than one-fifth had the meal every day. Fifty four percent of the respondents skipped their breakfast due to a variety of reasons including class pressure and had fast food after finishing their classes, either from varsity canteens or other fast-food outlets. Though 98% of the students were well informed about the negative effects associated with excessive fast food consumption, they were still profoundly addicted to it. Specific health education programs, dietary guidelines and effective public awareness campaigns could be initiated to address the unhealthy lifestyle of university students and improve their health.

**Keywords:** Fast food; knowledge, University students, Dietary intake, Food pattern, Bangladesh.

## Introduction

Consumption of takeaway and fast food continues to increase in Western societies and is particularly widespread among young people adolescents.<sup>1</sup> This unhealthy practice is also becoming more popular in developing countries. When the young enter university life, they take more control of their lifestyle, in particular food choices and practices,<sup>2</sup> especially if they are away from home.<sup>3,4</sup> The food consumption patterns and associated nutritional risks specific to university students is a key concern.<sup>5,6</sup> In recent years, nutritional knowledge of university students and their food consumption patterns have received global attention.<sup>1,6,7</sup>

Changes in lifestyle and loss of the family tradition of eating together trigger the popularity of fast foods among young people. The shift from healthy, homemade food to more convenient, longer lasting fast foods combined with a sedentary lifestyle has resulted in global fattening and related health complications.<sup>8,9</sup> Regular eating of fast food can increase the risk of weight gain and obesity because of having a high energy density with the presence of high levels of fat and sugar in the meal, and a correspondingly low level of fiber and protein.<sup>1,4,6</sup> A study conducted among urban private medical students in Bangladesh showed that a quarter of respondents were overweight which is higher than the national average.<sup>10</sup>

## Practice Points

- Consumption of takeaway and fast food is becoming more popular among young people adolescents in developing countries.
- Fast foods are responsible for obesity epidemics among the younger generations.
- The prevalence of fast food consumption among university students was 98.5% and more than one-fifth consumed fast food every day.
- The important factors for the preference of fast food include good taste, easy accessibility, increased convenience, and more pocket-friendly in nature.
- Specific health education programs, dietary guidelines and effective public awareness campaigns could be initiated to address the unhealthy lifestyle of university students and improve their health.

Dietary habits and lifestyle practices are considered as important determinants of being overweight.<sup>1-4</sup> Alarming, instead of preferring healthy foods, the young

**Correspondence:** Shatabdi Goon, BSc Thesis Student, Nutrition and Food Engineering Department, Daffodil International University, Dhaka -1207, Bangladesh. E-mail: [shatabdigoon@yahoo.com](mailto:shatabdigoon@yahoo.com).

generation is buying unhealthy fast foods causing a long term negative effect on their health as well as putting an additional economic pressure on parents as these foods are costly.<sup>6</sup> Though most of the young people consume fast food as a part of social gathering, they are getting addicted due to have addictive ingredients in the processing of it.<sup>7</sup> Most of the time students prefer this kind of ready to eat foods to save both time and money (due to its easy accessibility and availability).<sup>1-4</sup> University students are usually better educated and younger than a population-based sample, and thus present themselves as a suitable sample to examine the food consumption behavior, as the variability of ill health and education is minimal.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, increased knowledge of dietary guidance and advice does appear to be positively related to more healthful eating patterns among university students.<sup>11</sup> The aim of the present study was to examine the preference, prevalence and pattern of fast food consumption among young university students.

## Materials and methods

A cross-sectional study was carried out from March to April, 2013 among students attending four established private universities of Bangladesh situated in Dhanmondi, Dhaka: Daffodil International University, United International University, World University of Bangladesh, and State University of Bangladesh. A total number of 200 university students within the ages of 18 to 24 were randomly selected from these institutions in groups of 50 students from each. Students who were regular with their class schedule were included in the study, and those who were not regular in that sense were excluded. An equal number of male and female students were selected for the interview. All of the selected students were made well informed of the study aims and verbal consent was taken for their participation in the study. Interviews were conducted in the classroom and the varsity canteen while they were enjoying their class break. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data regarding age, sex, pocket money per month, meal patterns, fast-food preference, fast food consumption per week, monthly expenditure on fast food, soft drink preference, sources of fast food, the cause behind the consumption of fast food, the preferred time of fast food consumption, health complications, and socioeconomic status.

## Result

A total of 197 (98.5%) students reported their preference for fast food and approximately 22% of the respondents mentioned that they consumed fast food for 4 days per week where 21.3 % reported to have fast food for everyday of the week. Male students were more habituated with fast food consumption compared to female students. All the male students preferred fast food where 97% of female students reported about their preference. The type of fast food they preferred included fried chicken, pizzas, burgers, noodles and soft drinks. The main reasons for fast food consumption were: habit/pleasure (42.1%), easy availability (30.5%), lack of other suitable option (13.7%), and peer influence

(13.2%).

Forty seven percent of students had two major meals per day and breakfast was skipped by more than half of the students (54%). The main reasons of skipping the meals were class pressure (48.5%) and habit (22.5%) respectively. Most of the students reported to possess around Tk. 3000 in pocket money per month and spent around Tk. 1300 of that on fast food i.e. 43.3% of their pocket money was spent on fast food each month. Fast food outlets and the varsity canteen were reported to be popular fast food sources by 66.7% and 33.3% respondents respectively. More than 51% admitted to having fast food after finishing their classes, and one of the more popular times for consumption was lunch time. About 96% students reported to have soft drinks with fast food. Approximately 80% students knew about the ingredients that went into their fast food, and 95.6% were aware that fast food contains large amounts of fats and oils. Approximately 98% students were concerned about the negative effects associated with fast food consumption, and 60% pointed out obesity and weight gain as the most prominent consequence of excessive fast food consumption. Table 1 shows the detailed habits and patterns of food consumption of the respondents among the children.

## Discussion

In recent years, the habits and preferences of fast food has increasingly become popular in Bangladesh among young people and adolescents.<sup>12,13</sup> The fast food culture began its journey in Bangladesh in the early nineties and it is estimated that the industry is worth around Tk. 1000 crore, and is still growing.<sup>13</sup> This paper reports fast food consumption habits in young people attending four established private universities in Bangladesh. The findings showed that eating away from home is becoming more common, and the number of visits to fast food restaurants is growing even more rapidly. Fast food outlets are especially popular among the younger generation. Most of the university students prefer fast foods. In our study, about 98% of the students were greatly found to be associated with fast food consumption, and among them male respondents were more addicted than female. Preference for fast food among young people and adolescents was also found in other countries.<sup>1,7,11</sup> A Swedish study reported that female students led a healthier lifestyle than male students.<sup>14</sup> Our study result also showed that female students preferred more healthier food choices compared to their male counterparts.

The key factors for the expansion of the fast food culture in Bangladesh include globalization, information technology, rapid growth of corporate houses, private universities, an increasingly hectic lifestyle, the opportunity cost of women's time, and increased income levels of the people.<sup>13</sup> A study conducted by Islam & Ullah<sup>15</sup> identified brand reputation, accessibility, taste, cost, quality, food hygiene, and fat and cholesterol level as the factors related to fast food preferences by the university students in Bangladesh. Similarly to our

**Table 1:** Habits and patterns of food consumption of the respondents

Characteristics/food habits	Respondents (%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	100 (50%)
Female	100 (50%)
<i>Fast food preference</i>	
Yes	197 (98.5%)
No	3 (1.5%)
<i>Fast food preference</i>	
Male	100 (100%)
Female	97 (97%)
<i>Fast food consumption (day/week) (n=197)</i>	
1 day/week	1 (0.5%)
2 day/week	39 (19.8%)
3 day/week	36 (18.3%)
4 day/week	43 (21.8%)
5 day/week	33 (16.8%)
6 day/week	3 (1.5%)
7 day/week	42 (21.3%)
<i>Reasons of fast food preference (n=197)</i>	
Pleasure/habit	83 (42.1%)
Easy to access	60 (30.5%)
Influenced by others	26 (13.2%)
Lack of other suitable option	27 (13.7%)
Pocket friendly (comparatively cheap)	1(0.5%)
<i>Meal pattern per day (n=200)</i>	
1 meal	59 (29.5%)
2 meal	94 (47%)
3 meal	47 (23.5%)
More than 3 meal	0
<i>Skipped meal (n=200)</i>	
Breakfast	108 (54%)
Lunch	54 (27%)
Dinner	4 (2%)
No skipping	34 (17%)
<i>Causes behind skipping of meal (n=200)</i>	
Class pressure	97 (48.5%)
Habit	45 (22.5%)
Away from family	13 (6.5%)
Others	11 (5.5%)
<i>Soft drink consumption (n=197)</i>	
Yes	190 (96.4%)
No	7 (3.6%)

study, this study found that examples of the most prominent fast food items include burgers, pizzas, fried chicken, and sandwiches.<sup>15</sup>

Fast food, although it is convenient and a tasty addition to a diet, can have serious health and social effects. Fast foods exposed university students to a diet characterized by foods high in energy, fats, and added sugars, and low

in nutrient density.<sup>1,11</sup> Breakfast was the most often skipped meal among the students which was found in other studies.<sup>1,16</sup> Skipping breakfast over a long period may have detrimental effects on cardiometabolic health.<sup>16</sup> Almost all the students reported to have soft drinks with fast food. Soft drinks and fast food are energy dense foodstuffs that are heavily marketed to adolescents, and are likely to be important in terms of risk of obesity.<sup>17</sup> A dramatic increase in diabetes and other obesity related diseases has been observed in parallel with easy availability and access of fast food restaurants.<sup>8,9,18</sup> In the long run, this will increase healthcare costs and will stretch the limited available resources allocated to healthcare. Moreover, students spent approximately half of their pocket money on fast food, which put extra economic burden on the parents of the university students.

It was indicated in this study that most of the fast food users are well informed about the negative effects associated with fast food consumption, but they were still reported to have fast food at a regular basis without considering their health complications. The younger generations are getting addicted to fast food, which indicates a serious public health concern and urgent action should be taken to tackle this public health problem.<sup>1,2,9,17,18</sup>

Our study has a number of limitations. The data was self-reported and the study is cross-sectional which does not infer causal relationships. Furthermore, we examined only four private universities in the Capital city; this data should only be generalized cautiously for public universities or universities outside Dhaka city.

## Conclusion

This paper reports fast food preference and food habits among students attending universities in four established private universities of Bangladesh. The study demonstrated that university students tend to have poor eating habits (preferring the consumption of fatty fast foods and sugary soft drinks, skipping meals, etc). It is recommended to limit the consumption of fast foods, balancing it with nutritious foods if consumed, and to make healthier choices whenever possible. Specific health education programs, dietary guidelines and effective public awareness campaigns could be initiated to address the unhealthy lifestyle of university students and to improve their health. A combined initiative from families, universities, public health experts and the government is much needed to tackle this public health problem. University food outlets should be encouraged to provide a greater range of healthy and subsidized foods for the students.

## Acknowledgement

We would like to thank our honorable professors, colleagues and friends for supporting us to initiate the study subject. We are also grateful to those students who cooperated with us to conduct the interview.

## References

- Jaworowska A, Blackham T, Davies IG, Stevenson L. Nutritional challenges and health implications of takeaway and fast food. *Nutr Rev* 2013;71(5):310-8.
- Colic Baric I, Satalic Z, Lukesic Z. Nutritive value of meals, dietary habits and nutritive status in Croatian university students according to gender. *Int J Food Sci Nutr* 2003;54:473-84.
- Brevard PB, Ricketts CD. Residence of college students affects dietary intake, physical activity, and serum lipid levels. *J Am Diet Assoc* 1996;96:35-8.
- Kremmyda LS, Papadaki A, Hondros G, Kapsokefalou M, Scott JA. Differentiating between the effect of rapid dietary acculturation and the effect of living away from home for the first time, on the diets of Greek students studying in Glasgow. *Appetite* 2008;50:455-63.
- Gores SE. Addressing nutritional issues in the college-aged client: strategies for the nurse practitioner. *J Am Acad Nurse Pract* 2008;20:5-10.
- El Ansari W, Stock C, Mikolajczyk RT. Relationships between food consumption and living arrangements among university students in four European countries - a cross-sectional study. *Nutr J* 2012;11:28.
- Broccia F, Lantini T, Luciani A, Carcassi AM. Nutrition knowledge of Sardinian and Corsican university students. *Ann Ig* 2008; 20:49-55.
- Popkin B. The nutrition transition and obesity in the developing world. *J Nutr* 2001;131(3):871S-873S.
- Yadav K, Krishnan A. National Prevalence of Obesity: Changing patterns of diet, physical activity and obesity among urban, rural and slum populations in north India. *Obes Rev* 2008;9(5):400-8.
- Rasul FB, Shawon MSR, Nazneen S, Hossain FB, Malik SS, Islam MT. Do the dietary and lifestyle practices make the private medical students overweight: A cross-sectional study in Bangladesh? *J Biol Agri Health* 2013;3(2):130-9.
- Kolodinsky J, Harvey-Berino JR, Berlin L, Johnson RK, Reynolds TW. Knowledge of current dietary guidelines and food choice by college students: better eaters have higher knowledge of dietary guidance. *J Am Diet Assoc* 2007;107:1409-13.
- Tabassum A, Rahman T. Differences in consumer attitude towards selective fast food restaurants in Bangladesh: An implication of multi-tribute attitude model. *World Rev Bus Res* 2012;2(3):12-27.
- Farhana, T. Fast Food Culture in Dhaka, Bangladesh. <http://www.pickledpolitics.com/archives/11490> (accessed June 2013)
- Von Bothmer MI, Fridlund B. Gender differences in health habits and in motivation for a healthy lifestyle among Swedish university students. *Nurs Health Sci* 2005;7:107-18.
- Islam N, Ullah GMS. Factors affecting consumers' preferences on fast food items in Bangladesh. *J Applied Business Research* 2010; 26:131-46.
- Smith KJ, Gall SL, McNaughton SA, Blizzard L, Dwyer T, Venn AJ. Skipping breakfast: longitudinal associations with cardiometabolic risk factors in the Childhood Determinants of Adult Health Study. *Am J Clin Nutr* 2010;92(6):1316-25.
- Denney-Wilson E, Crawford D, Dobbins T, Hardy L, Okely AD. Influences on consumption of soft drinks and fast foods in adolescents. *Asia Pac J Clin Nutr* 2009;18(3):447-52.
- Pereira MA, Kartashov AI, Ebbeling CB, Van Horn L, Slattery ML, Jacobs DR Jr, Ludwig DS. Fast-food habits, weight gain, and insulin resistance (the CARDIA study): 15-year prospective analysis. *Lancet* 2005;365(9453):36-42.