

Dieting in female medical college students: Complete withdrawal from food as opposed to fat restriction for weight control

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Introduction

Dieting is emerging as the preferred mode for weight loss among adolescent females. Despite being medical students, the adverse effects of improper dieting may be ignored by many. Healthy diet restriction and restriction of majority of food components for weight loss is perceived as similar. Thus, often in the process of unguided dieting, intake of even those nutrients which are essential for health is neglected. This may lead to various deficiencies and disorders, e.g. deficiencies of fat soluble vitamins (A, D, E, K), osteoporosis, menstrual abnormalities, etc. This research is an effort to study the prevalence of dieting among female medical college students and the physical and psychological effects of dieting on the same.

Materials and methods

It is a cross-sectional descriptive type of study. 181 female students of various medical colleges of New Delhi were enrolled in this questionnaire based study consisting of questions related to dieting patterns, knowledge of minimal essential nutrients, adequate consumption of essential nutrients and nutrient deficiencies in dieters. All the data obtained was recorded systematically and analyzed using standardized statistical softwares, MS-Excel and SPSS-13.

Results

Dieting behavior was reported in 42% of the study population. The reasons for dieting were weight loss (64.4% dieters) and peer pressure (13.2% dieters). Physical and psychological problems were more among dieters as compared to non dieters. With increase in duration of dieting, significant increase was observed in physical symptoms, e.g. joint pain ($p=.013$), hairfall ($p=.005$) and menstrual problems ($p=.001$). One finding of utmost significance was that the ratio of students having the perception of being overweight to those who were actually overweight was significantly high in the study population ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion

This study shows that dieting is prevalent, not only among the obese, but also among those with normal BMI, or those who are underweight. Despite adequate knowledge of essential body nutrient requirements, their adequate consumption is hardly taken care of. A diet with higher protein and reduced carbohydrates combined with exercise additively improves body composition during weight loss. This study will help health professionals to educate students about modifications in their dieting patterns, so that they can achieve body fitness without having undue ailments.